RESEARCH ARTICLE

CONSUMERIST EDUCATION: WHAT IS IT WORTH?

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Whatever else education may purport to be, it involves, at least, the endeavour to transmit knowledge. Although it may be that not much of education takes place in a school, I shall argue that the values embedded in the dominant epistemology of institutional learning give rise to a number of educational myths, one of which is narrated in the currency of scientific materialism: an ideological coin whose other side is rampant consumerism. Because we end up commodifying everything, there is little, if anything, that has intrinsic value. We commodify both space and time and everything in these domains, and the value we ascribe to spatio-temporal things depends upon their potential capacity to be bought, sold, or leased. We commodify not only material goods but also the whole of culture. We commodify our relationships with each other and we sell to each other cultural experience, both manufactured and virtual to extend the sphere of commercialization infinitely. One consequence of the mythology of consumerism is that it lends ineluctably to futile, or endemically frustrated, aspiration on the one hand and increasing alienation on the other.

INTRODUCTION

According to Rifkin (2000), consumerism was first developed as a philosophical belief in the 1920s, though the concept, and the framework of discourse constructed to express it, remained recondite until the finish of World War 2. During the 1920s and early '30s, considerable effort was being directed by business leaders and philosophical economists to undermine the hold held upon the American public by the so-called Protestant Ethic, or the part of it which emphasized the moral import of restraint required to ensure frugality in all aspects of life, but especially lustful spending which is a vital precondition of the consumerist economy. The idea was to break the hold that Puritanical Protestantism had on parsimonious spending by, as Galbraith later phrased it (1958), seeking to 'create the wants it [business] seeks to satisfy' (Rifkin, 2000) Contriving to create the stage upon which consumerism could most effectively be played out, Kettering and Kryk did much in the 1920s to make the consumerist curtain rise to an enthusiastic public audience. In Hazel Kyrk's , *A Theory of Consumption*, for example, the outlining of the idea of aspiration in Consumer psychology is evident: 'Luxuries for the well-off [had to be] turned into necessities for the poorer classes.' Through developing marketing and branding in the 1920s, the average low-to-middle class worker was starting to develop the idea that they could be better off than they were. This development of marketing and branding coincided with the notion of credit: a burden most people, and

indeed sovereign states, are overwhelmed by even ninety years later. Thus, aspiration became an ideal that, at least in principle, could be 'achieved', even if by its very nature is rarely satisfied, or at best is only momentarily subdued. However, business thinkers quickly became ahead of the average consumer: as Kettering stated, 'the key to economic prosperity is the organized creation of dissatisfaction' (Rifkin, 2000). Therefore, the key tenet of consumerism named aspiration was developed in the 1920s as way of selling goods to 'dissatisfied' customers. It is a tenet that most major corporations cling to now: why keep the iPad 2 when the New iPad is exponentially better? Why not take your children to this fast food restaurant when the family in the advertisement is so happy there?! The key to creating a dissatisfied Consumer is to lay out the possibility of the perfect Consumer and then convey subtly to the audience that 'this could be you, if you want it to be you.' The problem with aspiration is that it is always replaced by aspiration. The grass is always greener on the other side: it just so happens that there exists infinite 'other sides' and levels of 'greener'. Hence, the ideal of aspiration as a basis for the Consumerist paradigm was established early and led to Consumerism's next two interrelated tenets: egotism and alienation.

Dissatisfied consumers vs perfect consumers: As established in the previous paragraph, the best way to pacify the problem it the 'Dissatisfied Consumer' is to create the idea of the 'Perfect Consumer'. The Perfect Consumer can come in many guises, but when all is said and done, they all strive to fulfil one uniting conceit: happiness. Through achieving whatever these imaginary characters want, they become happy, content in their life of consumption. What these advertisements tell the

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Consumer is that this could be you: essentially, you can be perfect, you can have the whitest teeth, be the size and shape you want to be, have as much fun as you want in your life, and be endlessly affluent. As advertisements (in any form) are a form of persuasion, there is a creation of a direct dialogue with the Consumers, with an aim to convince them that this is a special message just for them. And while advertising has been around for centuries (some would argue millennia), it is with the development of the 'Consumer Paradigm' that advertising has been taken to the almost unimaginable heights now witnessed that we see in contemporary society. The legacy we have is that a discourse has been created which represents a highly personalised, distinctive dialogue that emphasises the 'YOU' and only 'YOU'. Thus, through this creation of the distinctive 'YOU', the Consumer believes that he/she is special, and the tenet of egotism is enshrined.

Alienation: However, with the development of these two core beliefs of aspiration and egotism, the core belief of alienation is also concurrently developed. When the luxuries of the rich become aspirational necessities for the poor, a necessary condition for ensuring maximal consumption, the concept of alienation as an integral part of consumerist discourse becomes obvious. In regards to advertising, the persuasive nature of the text fosters a sense of alienation through the use of aspiration and egotism as key features of the advertisement structure. This occurs when the advertising machine is thrust upon those who are deemed by society to be valued at a below-average level. When lower classed peoples are subject to the Perfect Consumer as shown in advertisements, the model of perfection on offer is so distant from their reality that the advertisements take on an appearance of mockery to those who are alienated from the Consumerist structure; the advertisement is implying: "You are not valued enough to be able to afford these products, yet you are a worthless person if you cannot obtain them." The aspiration and egotism becomes flipped, as if in a hall of mirrors, showing the alienated lower class member that they are worthless people: the grass is definitely greener over there as your patch is just a dustbowl. Thus, the alienation that Marx argued would be a contributing factor toward the development of class consciousness is supplanted by the euphoria of identification: the development, realisation, and refinement of identities that allow the alienated worker to feel de-alienated. However, the consumer is far from de-alienated: by consuming products that are separated from humanity and nature, the consumer is consuming alienation as defined by Marx. Add to this the concept the Marcuse argument that society itself is now a bureaucracy through which one is bound: that the mass culture produced by the consumerist machine develops a false consciousness (1964), allowing one to believe that they have a Giddean self-reflexive choice in how to choose one's identity, when it is but a selection of choices offered by an elite bourgeois to help the proletariat feel in community. This advanced form of alienation also informs the anxiousness in the dissatisfied consumer, the aspiration to keep up with the Joneses, and the need for the euphoria of identification. Consumerism breeds alienation.

Identity construction: When examining the schism between the dissatisfied consumer and the perfect you, one conceit becomes clear: it is all about the construction of identity. The construction of identity has become increasingly problematic throughout the development of the Consumerist paradigm. Whereas, human adults could be expected to identify with

work, community, religion, and country in centuries previous, the hyper-globalised, technologized world that has developed deems that one must identify themselves through lens of mass culture. The development of mass culture is a tool of the Consumerist paradigm. By creating, and marketing, products that create a sense of dissatisfaction and the possibility of perfection, the Consumer is a perpetually anxious being. This anxiousness perpetuates itself through what Giddens labels the reflexive self (Willett, 2008). As Giddens acknowledges, the reflexive self is participatory: one chooses a lifestyle that one wishes to project and one must continuously work and reflect upon that self. The strength with which the Consumer paradigm has become the dominant social state, however, is analogous to the European Church before the Age of Enlightenment: to reject it, is to be excommunicated. To not be a part of the Consumerist agenda in this day and age, however, is to reject life itself, all-encompassing as it is. Therefore, the construction of identity in the Consumerist age is under the watchful eye of the purveyors of Consumerism. This identification of Consumerism allows for Foucault's theory of Consumerism as technology of the self to be remedied with Giddens' reflexive self as this identification acknowledges that there is a participatory element within the confines of the mandatory dominant paradigm (Willett, 2008). Thus, our consumerist lifestyle promotes the idea that our humanity and our self-worth are things that can be acquired. This 'acquisition' concept is easily understood if we undertake a linguistic study of the term 'goods'. Goods are, essentially, items that can be bought and sold at will and are the building blocks of any consumer society worth its salt. The issue is that the term 'goods' has been linguistically co-opted from the idea of 'good', as opposed to evil. This is Weber's idea of the Calvinist aesthetic writ large: if one can find the idea of God in everyday hard work and toil, then God can be found in payment of our services (Weber, 1930) and what is the payment of services good for if not the acquisition of goods. This is a simplistic explanation of the development of capitalism, as defined by changing the benevolent God into the benevolent items that make consumers feel morally good. After all, there isn't much difference between believing in universal sin and 'keeping up with the Joneses.' Therefore, by building up self-worth through the acquisition of goods, the consumerist idea of moral good is built. However, if moral good is developed not through a 'benevolent' Almighty but seemingly 'neutral' things, then the idea of a moral 'good' must be questioned. It follows that, at the very least, if 'goods' are just neutral items that humans place their own self-worth and value upon, then the entire consumerist endeavour is morally ambivalent at best. The issue must then become: are these 'goods' morally neutral at all?

Power epistemology and laura's critique of the transformative subjugation of nature: Francis Bacon's creed states that scientific knowledge equals power over nature, the idea that humanity can control its surrounds (Laura and Cotton, 1999). While this was postulated many generations ago, the creed still lives on through what Laura describes as transformative subjugation. Essentially, the answer to what transformative subjugation can be found in the phrase scientific knowledge is power over nature: that is, that knowledge, the perception of truth, is the ability to control our surroundings. To control our surroundings, we deaden the world that surrounds us, as lifelessness is one of the only certainties that we can believe. This deadening can be found

all around us through biotechnology, pyrotechnology, and computechnology: through technologies to control the DNA of living things, to chemical reduction of natural things to create new compounds, and onto the depersonalisation of humanity through the screen. Therefore, we surround ourselves with dead things, thereby deadening ourselves and our relationships to each other at the same time. Which is where we find the crux of this argument: that providing ourselves with power and control over nature, each other, and ourselves, we are killing nature, our nature, and the nature of our relationships. And it is these relationships that form the core of the human experience: that life is not the pursuit of reductionism, but the opening up of our experience to others, which is almost the diametrically opposed position. And yet, the dominant paradigm in which our truth is currently held, is one which can be described as depersonalising, dehumanising, and desanctifying. However, the growth of consumerist philosophy out of capitalist endeavours is not only indebted to the epistemology of power, but also has at its core an actual malevolence that seeks to inculcate all into its base philosophical tenets of aspiration, entitlement, and alienation.

The link between globalisation and consumerism: With the establishment of these Consumerist tenets in place, it now becomes important to understand how this dominant paradigm has shaped all ideological and technological change that has occurred since its passive acceptance into society. The major ideological change of the past century that has been shaped by the Consumerist paradigm is that of the globalisation of the world economic markets. Globalisation can be viewed as two distinct, yet related, movements: one as a technological system of interconnectedness; one as an economically-driven political structure. Globalisation, as a structure designed for change into a free market, neo-liberal world-wide economy, has a history that reaches back to the late 1940s. Proponents of Globalisation in the economy argue that with the development of free trade, open markets, and floating currencies, businesses, and indeed sovereign states, will be able to compete at a more efficient level than ever before. This new context of consumerist exchange was deemed to represent a major economic advance not only by the policy makers of sovereign states but also by the worlds' most independent and highly regarded economic institutions: such as, the IMF, and the World Bank. These two institutions, created by the Bretton Woods agreement at the end of World War 2, have slowly but surely pared the road by way of which the Globalisation economic structure could be put into place. What these institutions have failed to identify is the devastating effect that Globalisation can have on the highly advanced Western societies and, also, the destabilising effects that it can have on developing countries. Globalisation, perceived as a modality of technological universalism for change has directly affected the extent to which globalisation has become an economic force (Rizvi and Lingard, 2006). As technology has improved, and opened up the world, the globalised society has become integrated. This means that many of the barriers that stopped trade and communication have been removed with the advent of easy and cheap transportation, and information technology starting with telecommunication to the instantaneous movement of information over the internet. Therefore, globalisation designed to serve as a technological agent is another way of re-framing the reductio-mechanist scientific method into modern philosophical concerns. Additionally, the economic force of globalisation gained momentum with

corporations focused on their bottom line, realising that basic manufacturing labour costs much less in developing nations, with lower standards of livingthan it does in the traditional homes of their companies. This has led to the dissolution of the manufacturing class in countries where the third and fourth sectors are expected to absorb the unemployed. However, in a country with growing income inequality, such as the USA, the service sector uses corporate theory, and with high demand for jobs, providers can start lowering their overhead with lower wages (Madden, 2000). This leads to a situation where, as in the US, the conservative reports on underemployment peg the figure at 20% (Shedlock, 2011). However, to truly understand how both the consumerist paradigm and, by proxy, globalisation as a technological agent for change can be dangerous paradigms in which to inculcate into our children, one must first piece together these theories and philosophies to provide a look at how this plays in our contemporary society.

DISCUSSION

The corporatisation of schooling: In contemporary society, the bastion of the consumerist endeavour can be found in the devolution of education. While the nous of critical thinking and compassion are the elements of the human mind that need developing throughout a young person's life, arguably, the manner in which mass schooling has developed has led to different priorities, as we will see. Henry Parkes, a politician who helped shape the development of mass schooling in New South Wales, put it succinctly when, in 1863, he argued that it is cheaper to provide schools than to build gaols (Murray, 1999). This recently has been echoed by current the US President when he stated that higher education is an economic imperative, due to the costs related to the high rates of unemployment amongst those without a university degree (UPI, 2012). Reid also argues that the current focus in Australian schooling is on the economic function of creating human capital for the labour force (Reid, 2010), a view of the Australian education system that is supported by Axford and Seddon (2006). An alternate view of this economic rationalisation of schooling can be seen in the views that denounce the corporatisation of schooling. Outcomes-Based Education, a framework that guides contemporary curricular and pedagogical movements in mainstream Australian educational discourse, has been accused of leading the corporatisation of schooling due to the business-like jargon that permeates its theory (Berlach, 2004) such as: outcomes; performance enablers; discrete content skills; and, compartmentalisation of tasks (Killen, 2000). There have been concerns regarding the corporatisation of schooling as far back as Kohn, in 1993, who stated that "a performance focus is inherently problematic in a classroom." Jorgensen references this concept of 'performance focus' in her examination of Aboriginal attendance and performance in relation to Mathematics education, and how problematic the introduction of NAPLAN testing is to the perceived achievement of those children in remote areas (Jorgensen, 2010). This perspective of but one minority, alienated by schooling, highlights the idea that pedagogy, despite being steeped in "principles of social justice and equity (NSW DET, 2003)", is schismatic with the corporatized bureaucracy in which it operates: or as Reid would phrase it, that the purposes of schooling are incompatible with the modalities (structure, culture, processes) of schooling (Reid, 2010). IThus, the alienation that Marx argued would be a contributing factor toward the development

of class consciousness is supplanted by the euphoria of identification: the development, realisation, and refinement of identities that allow the alienated worker to feel de-alienated. However, the consumer is far from de-alienated: by consuming products that are separated from humanity and nature, the consumer is consuming alienation as defined by Marx. Add to this the concept the Marcuse argument that society itself is now a bureaucracy through which one is bound: that the mass culture produced by the consumerist machine develops a false consciousness (1964), allowing one to believe that they have a Giddean self-reflexive choice in how to choose one's identity, when it is but a selection of choices offered by an elite bourgeois to help the proletariat feel in community. This advanced form of alienation also informs the anxiousness in the dissatisfied consumer, the aspiration to keep up with the Joneses, and the need for the euphoria of identification. Consumerism breeds alienation. As a force for the perpetuation of a socially cohesive society, schools train and mould the people who control the future. This is acknowledged by various writers throughout history: from Foucault's musings on the similarities and differences between penitentiaries and schools (1979); Dewey's insistence that schools must represent present life, and that the teacher is responsible for the maintenance of proper social order (1897); and, MCEECDYA's goal to "ensure that schooling contributes to a socially cohesive society that respects and appreciates cultural, social and religious diversity (MCEECDYA, 2008)".

Conclusion

The alternate views of how Dewey's modality of schooling is affected have been well documented over time. Freire looks at the perpetuation of the status quo as perpetuation of prejudices and of the unjust society, and denounces the ideal form of schooling as one which cannot just be emulated for all minorities as a form of cultural imperialism (Freire, 1972). This links in with Jorgensen's appraisal of pedagogies built around urban concepts of learning not being able to be simply grafted onto a civilisation that experiences pedagogy differently (Jorgensen, 2010). While Freire takes a Marxist approach to the solution, seizing the means of production for the benefit of all, the synthesis of these articles into a coherent assessment of the dominant paradigm will reveal that Marxist revolution has not occurred in Western societies due to the diligence with which the dominant paradigm is inculcated into our youth through the idea of schooling as a perpetuator of the status quo. This status quo, as evidenced above, is the dominant paradigms of consumerism based in an epistemology of power: the deadening of our world through the methods we have developed to reductify and manipulate ourselves, each other and the world around us. We place a high significance in schools on remembering facts and readings, as opposed to critically thinking and learning. Schools should be a bastion of free thinking and the development of the human mind, however, the bureaucracy we have built around the schooling system has evolved to place the economic needs of society ahead of the individual pursuit of happiness for each person. The rise of consumerism, as a direct result of the progress of technology made possible by the creed of science as defined by Bacon and incorporating Laura's critique, is completed by occupying a need in society: the need to feel de-alienated regarding one's life, in order to avoid Marxist revolution, or a spiritual disenfranchisement. By establishing how these dominant paradigms came into existence, and what tenets they

exemplify – reductionism, transformative subjugation, aspiration, entitlement, and alienation – it becomes necessary to examine how they have infiltrated our lives at the core: through training and 'education'. It, then, becomes imperative to develop models of change and progress, as opposed to death and decay.

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