September 2013

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Recommended Citation

Parsons, J., & Frick, W. (2017). The Building of Consumerism and the Impact of School Sorting. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 13 (2). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.13.2.05>

The Building of Consumerism and the Impact of School Sorting

Jim Parsons & William Frick

A recent 2008 television commercial for Rogers Phone shows a group of young people sitting around a table, when suddenly a young woman comes up to share that she got a new phone for Christmas. In fact, she had opened it early and was using it, but said she would put it back under the tree so she could open it on Christmas morning. A young man asks, “Well, where is the surprise on Christmas morning, when you open your gifts now?” She responds “Watch,” and suddenly erupts into paroxysms of feigned joy as she pretends she has seen it for the first time. The group, duly impressed, nods—good job faking it!

There are many things disturbing about this television commercial, least of which is the fact that someone in Rogers’ think tank believes this experience represents a kind of “truth in advertising.” First, the ad celebrates an entitled sneakiness—although it is a Christmas gift, the young woman has opened the phone because she wants to. It is really that simple. Second, she has demonstrated—and been supported by the advertisement—that instant gratification is good. Why wait, when you can have things now? Third, the advertisement honors faking it—in other words, lying. Things will be fine, because she has the ability and will to feign sincerity and no one will know the difference. Finally, all these actions are condoned by the group—whose basic value set centers around two things: (1) their appreciation for the material possession—it is a “good” thing—as in “material good” and (2) their awe for their friend’s ability to pull off her act of insincerity.

The advertisement is certainly not about joy on Christmas morning, nor does the advertisement see anything wrong with the sort of “white lie” attendant upon the young woman’s “stealing” [Is it really hers until the arrival of the occasion for which it is given? And what is the difference, assuming the gift was from a parent, between this child’s opening this Christmas present or taking money from Dad’s wallet under the belief that Dad would leave it to her upon his death anyway? It’s just

a matter of timing right?] The advertisement is about having what one wants—and having it when one wants it.

The “job” of the commercial is to infect a “giggle” upon those who watch. But the truth of that giggle reveals the hegemony of consumer culture. The advertisement only works because it is deeply etched within the promotion of a deeper cultural myth and the “giggle” it engenders shows how deeply we accept the myth—in other words, we get it! Furthermore, the advertisement counts on us getting it in two ways: (1) we understand the ad’s logic and (2) we go out and buy (get) the product. The commercial’s hermeneutic informs us of the behaviors and current practices of youth in a society of instant gratification that lacks an understanding of ethical responsibility or the consequences of being a fake. For those “inside” the commercial, the critique of us as critics would be to suggest that too much is being read into a commercial meant only to catch attention, show what a product can do and how one’s life is better for having that product, and provoke a giggle.

The commercial, as is, does what it is supposed to do in a purely market-driven, corporate sense. The advertisement convincingly presents a product that creates what Valas (2009) calls a TOMA (Top Of the Mind Awareness, which in “guerrilla retailing” means developing a marketing plan so that consumers want or need the things you sell) experience for the viewer persuading them to consume—liberally and unhindered. That businesses market to children makes good economic sense, because children grow to become consumers and profits rise. For political conservatives, such marketing aligns with a fundamental philosophy that open, free, and liberal capitalistic markets, unhindered and constrained by regulation, are in everyone’s economic best interests.

Our task is not to evaluate such marketing or to point out the rightness or wrongness of such advertising. Instead, our point is to highlight what we believe such advertisements represent in terms of cultural-economic shifts and to suggest what these shifts mean for the curriculum of schooling. To sum up our main point, we believe schools are unknowingly complicit in the building of consumerist culture by creating a curriculum of sorting that works to build a consumer class whose main job is to practice materialism and fuel economic growth.

Why Schools are Up Against It

To better understand this cultural-economic shift, it is helpful to understand how economic ideas have grown and changed. In North America, these changes both reflect and shape how people have lived. To highlight these philosophical shifts, Jardine (2004) notes that classic liberalism (which fell out of vogue in the late 19th century, until a brief revival via Milton Friedman in the 1970s) assumed people were producers, an assumption in line with the needs of a productive economy; neoclassic liberalism (which began at the end of the 1970s) assumed people were consumers, an assumption in line with the needs of a consumptive society. In a

similar vein, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (written in 1776) argued that the market maximized people's ability to labor productively; Milton Friedman more recently assumed that the market maximized people's consumer choices. Classical liberalism morphed from a philosophy that embodied *utilitarian* individualism into a neoclassic liberalism that embodied *expressive* individualism.

Thus, liberalism as a concept has re-defined itself. Today's conservatives are more properly called "classic liberals," and it is ironic that in the United States of America, Republicans call Democrats liberals because Republicans themselves typically espouse two classically liberal policies: (1) they wish to return to a *laissez faire* economic system and (2) they want a return to Protestant morality as practiced before the 1960s. The economic theory espoused by Republicans is libertarianism; although Republicans are not typically morally libertarians. Republicans believe the market should be left alone to reward those who "have what it takes" to benefit from their own insights, abilities, and perhaps even good luck. Restrictions of a free market are restrictions of free economic choice and are consequently suspect. Ironically, Republicans talk of government leaving citizens alone, but really mean government should leave the economy alone. Republicans are less willing to keep government out of areas of morality and are quite willing to have government institute school prayer and restrict abortions, for example.

The medical health insurance plans offered by John McCain and Barack Obama during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign represent a case in point about how Republicans and Democrats read the way people think—or should think—differently. Obama wanted to create governmental programs that would provide health care to people so that no one would be left out. McCain wanted to provide money to people so they could choose their own health care—or, if desired, could choose not to have health care. Beneath the chatter about "big government" and "small government" was a basic but unstated difference between how Democrats and Republicans understand human nature. The elephant in the room for Democrats was the belief that many humans would simply make the wrong choice, spend the money provided by a Republican government, and continue to be on the government's medical dole. Although one might also argue for efficiency of cost benefit, deep inside Democratic thinking is the belief that humans aren't always wise and need to be organized and "encouraged" to be so. Republicans, on the other hand, either believed humans are more sagacious, more apt to make wiser choices, or—even if they are not—should have the right to make choices because 'no one should tell anyone else how to live.' Republicans are more willing than Democrats to accept a citizen's wrong choices as part of the practical working out of freedom. What many people fail to ferret out of this issue is that, when considered, Republican icon Ronald Reagan probably had more faith in the wisdom and judgment of Americans than new Democratic icon Barack Obama—even though Obama would be considered to be more a 'Man of Hope.'

Jardine (2004) points out an enduring irony in Western industrialism and

commerce. The breakdown of the Protestant ethic that stressed hard work, thrift, and self-denial might be lamented, but that breakdown was necessary for the economy to grow and for the creation of a large middle class. Specifically, if everyone practiced the Protestant work ethic, no one would purchase the goods produced from the vibrant economic impact of the very Protestant work ethic that generated the explosion of consumer goods within Western society. Those goods exist because years ago people accepted and lived the myth that they should work hard, save for what they needed, buy when they could afford to, and willingly delay what they wanted right now in light and appreciation of a bigger picture—a future where they and their children would eventually earn and appreciate the rewards of their hard work. Ironically, too many hard-working, save-for-tomorrow by delaying gratification citizens are not good economically. In fact, the growth of a business can only be fueled when people buy the consumer goods or services produced by that business. In other words, if a company is to flourish economically, someone has to buy the goods and services that company produces; if not, the products the company offers will not create profit and, without profit, the company will not grow. Without growth there can be no expansion of business and the dream of wealth that fuels it.

In a consumer society, those who practice self-denial and savings render the society dysfunctional. If it didn't exist already, a culture of consumerism would have to be created and, to sustain itself, would have to teach people to practice spending instead of saving. Instant gratification encouraged by credit (a unique invention that allows even more “have it now”), is more useful in growing a “free” market than the Protestant work ethic. It is necessary that vibrant free market economics coincide with libertarian attitudes towards personal spending. Hence, when a September 11 happens, a President who acts within this logic will encourage people to spend.

The Way Schools Behave

Let us make a connection between what happens in schools and the history of liberalism and neo-liberalism. It would be impossible for schools not to teach students a broad curriculum that includes and embeds society's prevailing mythologies. The way people talk and interact, the values they carry from home, the way they dress, the “toys” (cell phones and the like) they play with, the content of their conversations, and all the likes and dislikes, come with students and teachers to school to make up part of the curriculum—‘like white on rice.’

When young people come to school, they engage that broad curriculum; and, they are chastened by a school culture that includes being evaluated both by the exams and the values (formal and informal) of that school culture. To one extent or another, they cannot help but be shaped by their experiences—either by compliance or resistance. Some children succeed; some children fail to succeed and sometimes it is difficult to answer why.

What we do know is that, by the time our young finish school, either by drop-

ping out or by graduation, many have had negative school experiences. These young people then become the parents of the next generation of children who attend schools. It would be naïve to think that the children of those children would not embody their parents' fears and stories and carry them to school. When taking about parental involvement in schools, educators employ the truism that suggests schools and teachers must realize that increasing parental involvement is often a question of overcoming pre-existing parent biases. The truth of this comment is testament that something about schools is "wrong" for a number of parents and children. It is no wonder many parents dislike showing up at school; they have little history of success there and don't feel good when they come. After a parent-teacher conference night, teachers routinely suggest, with no sense of the deep irony of the statement, 'the only parents who came were the ones they didn't need to see.'

This history of lack of success begins early for many. Having taught grade seven, Jim came to believe that, by the time young people arrive at junior high school, they know if they will be successful in school. Young people have faced enough formal or informal assessments—or assessments have been done on them—to give them a sense of where they stand in the pecking order of school culture. Some students will glide into university education; some will opt for other vocations—all generally decided quite early in a student's career, even in what is characterized as an "open" and "accessible" educational system in North America when compared to other educational systems around the world.

Prizes and signposts guide students "making either choice."¹ Those intelligent in the ways schools measure intelligence come to gain a vision of their own efficacy. To the extent to which they "apply themselves" in ways sanctioned by the educational system, they become the intellectual leaders of society. They will be granted further opportunities, practice, and knowledge to continue to develop self-efficacious behaviors. They become the "emperors" in Kevin Kline's *Emperor's Club* (2002).

The prize for those not intelligent in the ways school measures intelligence is that, instead of a vision of efficacious leadership, they gain a vision of a "good job." This good job is clearly tied to wages and the promise that, to the extent to which they "apply themselves" at work, they can gain the promise of consumer goods and a comfortable life, all of which is wrapped around the extent to which they embrace the goals of materialism and consumerism. What makes these people uniquely good at being consumers of materialism are the attributes that made them poor school students—most didn't study or work hard. Instead, they did something else probably more enjoyable. Perhaps they watched television, talked to their friends, or played Nintendo's Wii. Whatever they opted for, they opted toward short-term gratification and opted away from the self-denial needed to succeed as a student.

These people will merge into a consumer society whose lack of self-denial and whose corresponding bent towards instant gratification will, in fact, be counted upon to fuel the consumerist economic activities of business. The positive skills

for consumerism are negative school skills. But, they are far from new skills; they have already been learned and practiced in the school setting. Specifically, in junior high school and high school, these young people come to practice behaviors that will soon become prized within their group. They play instead of work; they avoid responsibility and eschew consequences for their actions; and they regularly choose instant gratification over self-denial and materialism over thrift.

Schools and the philosophy that runs through them both rue this behavior and yet are complicit in creating it by regularly sorting students and shaping student behavior. Not that stemming these behaviors would be easy, but any high-stakes or redundant sorting devices that permanently peg student performance helps create student identity by bifurcating it one way or another.

Choice, the Consumerist Cultural Myth, and School Reform

Social reproduction lies deep in our culture, and finds its way into even the literature of children. For example, in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, Albus Dumbledore's educational problem centers on how to train students not just in the "technology" of magic but also in the moral discernment necessary to avoid the reproduction of the great Dark Lords like Voldemort. Not ironically, a Sorting Hat decided which of four houses a student would enter. Even in *Harry Potter* (1997), sorting into one house or another is based upon the different values and qualities of students. For example, Dumbledore noted to Harry that the hat placed him in Gryffindor.

"Listen to me, Harry. You happen to have qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students. Resourcefulness, Determination, a certain disregard for rules. Yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think."

"It only put me in Gryffindor," said Harry "Because I asked not to go in Slytherin."

"Exactly," said Dumbledore. "Which makes you very different from [Voldemort]. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

Harry asked, "Who am I at heart?" But a better question would be, "What must I do to become what I should be?" In Rowling's books, Harry's character was not a fixed thing, but something he was responsible to shape. Hence, the Greeks called character "that which is engraved," and it has been well-known that education carries with it the act of engraving.

We are not alone in our view that schools are complicit in furthering consumerist society's need to build a consumer class by sorting students into basically two groups. *Newsweek* (April 24, 2008) contained an article by Thomas Toch² titled "Still at Risk," a review of the 25-year old U.S. Department of Education's report "A Nation at Risk."³ Ironically, the original report was released in the emerging post-industrial economy "fueled" by the recession of the early 1980s that caused massive layoffs in the industrial and manufacturing sectors. The Report called, like

Obama calls, for Americans to preserve and enhance their places in the middle class and for American businesses to stay competitive in a new economic era. The Report challenged the fundamental assumption of public education that had emerged during the 20th century—that the best education for America’s students was to (1) acquire basic literacy skills in the early grades and then (2) learn the skills practical in the factory—a utilitarian vision of public schooling that had dominated 20th century curriculum.

In Toch’s words, the 20th century saw public schools as “sorting machines,” and offered students different educations based on assumptions about their futures. But the reform didn’t “work”; that is, it didn’t help students succeed in school. By the end of the 1980s, students still performed at alarmingly low levels when measured by the schools “standard-gauging” agencies and professional education organizations. Educators began to accept the idea that many students could not, and in fact should not, achieve “higher levels” of education. The eventual result of such thinking was George W. Bush’s signing of “No Child Left Behind Act” in 2002.

“No Child Left Behind” is generally seen as an inherently corrupt policy; however, it should have been an expected next step following the older George Bush’s and Bill Clinton’s establishment of state education standards and national educational goals that required student testing (in Canada, Alberta’s high stakes tests are a version of such control) and pressured schools from the outside by holding educators accountable for results (e.g., as British Columbia’s Fraser Institute routinely does). Such exams exacerbate the sorting process taking place in schools. Our point is that the change was not a problem of policy, it was a problem of culture; and, when policy and culture conflict, culture trumps policy. By the time “No Child Left Behind” became policy, most students had already come to accept their place within the larger society—whether they knew it or not.

Conservatives (classic liberals) tend to believe solutions lie in the marketplace; they had, under Ronald Reagan’s lead in the 1980s, come to metaphorically treat schools as “markets” that would “free” students. Following this policy, they worked to create competition between public and private schools by theorizing⁴ that, if one treated schools as markets and dispersed billions of dollars in federal education aid through vouchers that could be redeemed by parents at their choice of schools, one could create free-market schooling with the potential for students, parents, and families to shape their own education and thus, “get ahead.” In another market-focused alternative, Toch (2008) notes the rise in the 1990s of publicly-funded and independently-operated charter schools, which today educate a third of all public-school children in the United States; many school districts in Canada have mirrored these initiatives.

The reports noted here and the actions springing from them had it wrong. The consumerist myth was not something different kinds of schools or different choices about how families educate children, could fix. Instead, the idea had been built deeply into the fabric of North American society. Like it or not, schools came

to do exactly what they were supposed to do—their task was to sort people into two groups—an efficacious elite who continued on an advanced educational track and a “middle class” whose basic job was to fuel the economy through their own consumption. The task of this “healthy” middle class was to spend its income to buy the material goods produced by the nations’ factories in greater and greater amounts—and thus, fuel the economy.

So, as mentioned, when George W. Bush says, after 9-11, “Go out and spend!” He is being true to the schools’ unspoken task of sorting and equipping. The student behaviors teachers so often experience—the lack of a work ethic and decisions increasingly made with a bias toward instant gratification rather than self-denial—emerge from the very ethic upon which consumer society is built. Such student behavior has little to do with standards or students’ inherent abilities but more to do with school design. That the design is not conscious or remains unspoken does not belie its existence; teachers (any of us actually), although we whine, should not be surprised by the evolution.

Our society’s economic “success,” as it is, is increasingly shaped by a small segment of highly-educated, efficacious leaders. The North American economy as a whole is driven by those who have, for reasons which make them poor students but good consumers, failed to gain leadership but have worked to gain enough economic power to utilize their best economic weapons—instant gratification and the lack of self-denial for the sake of consumerism and materialism.

The economy, reacting as sensitively as a teenager in love, is driven by consumer confidence—which has become the classic way to measure the economic self-esteem of those who fuel the economy. If consumers feel things will get better, they will buy. The plight of the middle class might improve if North America’s economy regains its confidence but the ability of that same middle class to shape the values and events of that society will decrease as their buy-in to a consumerist myth increases. Further, the children of this middle class, whose vision shrinks narrower as they are raised to adopt the values of their parents within this powerful myth, will have fewer intellectual opportunities to critically break free.

Then what of our schools? If it is true that children raised in families where books are prized and celebrated have a greater chance of becoming more literate, what literacy do children gain when they are raised within families where uncritical materialism and the consumer goods spawned from it are prized and celebrated? One thing is certain, teachers will find out during the next decade or two.

Overconsumption, Beauty-Identity, and Faking It

Two illustrations of many that could be chosen help demonstrate how the reality of the self-defining consumptive myth has come to permeate North American culture. Chris Matthew’s (2002), of MSNBC’s *Hardball*, book titled *American: Beyond Our Grandest Notions*, reviews F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and

notes that Jay Gatsby was about his “father’s business.” This pseudo-religious phrase highlights the fervor to which the American myth of beauty has developed in the 20th century. Although *The Great Gatsby* is a classic story of a second chance, it is also a story of how North America has changed from a society where human worth was embodied in a person’s character to where human worth became embodied in that person’s beauty or celebrity. This change encourages a consumption mentality because, although it is almost impossible to purchase character, it is quite possible to purchase beauty. As Fitzgerald wrote in Chapter 6,

His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God...and he must be about His Father’s business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty. So he invented...Jay Gatsby...and to this conception he was faithful to the end. (1925, p. 99)

Gatsby became an idea of the self-creation Americans have mastered. The idea emerges from an ability to believe in oneself, but it also emerges from the focus of that belief—a focus on self-defined beauty. Ralph Lauren, who has come to sell beauty, noted in *Vanity Fair*: “My look is not really European. It’s an American’s visualization of Europe in the 1930s. I look in from the other side” (Lauren in Matthews, 2002, p. 25). To understand the culture of Lauren’s Polo ads, one only need to look at the faces of the people on display. These faces capture an arrogance that manifests “I was born to be beautiful.” Ralph Lauren’s store on Madison Avenue, once a stately mansion, has become a temple to “beauty,” where the newly rich come to pay worship to the old, aristocratic rich and leave with the clothing and furnishings that promise both a comfortable life and a comfortable identity.

Second, in her song “Beautiful,” Christina Aguilera, highlights her emotions about holding onto a conception of being “beautiful” in the face of immense pressure and criticism:

I am beautiful no matter what they say
words can’t bring me down
I am beautiful in every single way
yes, words can’t bring me down
so don’t you bring me down today.

As she sings, the song is at first mellow, but in the stanza Aguilera’s voice emphasizes her need to be heard. Her song tells us that she is, indeed, satisfied with herself and what she is. And what is the “she” that satisfies her? She is a beautiful *individual*, able to decide her own conception of beauty and free to live within that conception. Others might critique her, but disapproval does not discourage her. In fact, others’ opinions don’t matter. Emotionally and mentally her self-worth rests in her opinion alone.

Ironically, her song tells her audience that they should not care about what

anyone says about them. Ever the post-modern, for her everyone is beautiful in the way it appeals to them. Her lyrics, diction, and tone present a positive message to anyone “brought down” by others. But, what really is she claiming here? She is claiming that beauty is more important than moral purpose or doing the right thing. This individualistic, almost solipsistic viewpoint pushes her to individual definitions of merit and value. While internal strength is important, that strength is wrapped around her individual concept of “beauty.” Obviously, two pieces of evidence tell us her concept of beauty is important: first, she sings about it—it is a valuable topic for an artist to deal with; second, because artists direct their work to audiences, she believes her audience understands her message. They too will see the importance of self-defined beauty and its consumptive corollary as a descriptive evaluation of life’s core value.

Business echoes this ethos and, during the mid-20th century, had to change old social patterns of consumption to prosper and grow. Business began to reshape people from those who worked to those who consumed—as noted, a move from classic liberalism to neoclassic liberalism. In this conversion they utilized a great ally: they used advertising. Most advertising of the early 1900s described the real presence (the product exists) and concrete benefits (this is how the product can meet needs) to people. Things have changed. The benefits of products morphed to include more the mythological than the physical: so, for Ralph Lauren, a coat is re-stitched into more than protection from inclement weather and becomes one key to enter the top echelon of society. Of course, because it opens such an expensive door, there is a corresponding cost. Designer labels are truly wonderful keys, because companies can now produce fewer “designer” products and make larger profits, suggesting that designer labels are created more from identity than from fabric.

That people accepted this cultural myth is an understatement: people bought the myth and the material symbols of that myth. Furthermore, the invention and extension of credit meant they didn’t even need money. By the end of the 20th century, fueled by an increased ability to act out instant gratification, credit card debt skyrocketed. It is more than fair to note that the current housing and real estate crash in the United States, while blamed almost entirely on banks and credit institutions, was at least a partnership forged between the unwillingness of individuals to practice self-denial and the credit institutions’ encouragement of those same people to take advantage of opportunities for instant gratification without a big picture consideration of the consequences if something went wrong; using credit was not wrong—in fact, it was a right. Until 1986, United States credit card interest was tax deductible. As credit began to feed itself, homes grew larger to store the unneeded consumer goods bought on credit. Consumption had become a way of life and a right of free citizens.

This change has been drastic. In less than 100 years, the definition of what makes life worth living and what constituted human value was re-shaped from the value of character to the value of material goods. It is hard to say what the founders

of any nation in North America might say about the current propensity of North Americans to believe they are living in the best of all times—based on their abilities to collect and consume material goods. Consumption became the good life and ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ pushed people to believe they were the total of what they could buy. Their personal image was shaped by what they had gathered; when need for survival and protection have been met, what’s left? The answer is the aesthetic—the need for beauty. The consumptive nature of a beauty-identity has been famously depicted in the popular PBS documentary *Affluenza*. We live within a diseased culture of epidemic proportions. The disease is not consumption to support and maintain life, but overconsumption and the feigning that such behavior is the good life.

When the aesthetic became the measure of value, people’s needs for consumption changed. In the early and middle 20th century, a person was judged on the basis of production: baby-boomers grew hearing their parent’s admonitions that “the world doesn’t owe you a living.” However, in a consumer society, people are judged by the aesthetic image they project. Personality becomes more important than character, and one’s role model becomes Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt, or another “beautiful person” upon whom celebrity has been bestowed and whose lives are valued as powerful.

Still, every once in a while celebrity bumps into older definitions of human value. An example is the “plight” of Sean Avery, recently of the Dallas Stars (ice) hockey team. Avery, who was being paid up to \$12 million over a three-year contract to play hockey, made extremely crude, sexual comments about another player’s girlfriend. His teammates and organization quickly separated themselves from these comments and Avery was suspended from the team. In some ways, poor Avery had been sucker-punched or, in hockey terms, slashed. Although his comments were salacious and far beyond crass, Avery had made a career of edgy living and speaking and, in fact, had been rewarded for such behavior because teams thought his celebrity made him a “fan favorite” and his employer, the Dallas Stars, had used him as a way to sell tickets.

The culture of overconsumption, beauty-identity, celebrity, and faking it has become a model of being for at least North America’s younger “middle class,” and they seem to have thoroughly internalized this conception of what makes a person valuable, worthy, or important. In its simplest sense, school uniforms have been touted as a way of de-classing (not bringing stress on those less well-to-do to keep up to the fashions of the more financially-able) school, but also as a way to tone down the more titillating outfits worn by young women and men in schools.⁵ In a consumer society, people are judged by their image and spend to create and project that image—the food they eat, the clothes they wear, the technology they possess, the sincerity they fake, the personality they project. Advertisers, perhaps more than other groups, show us the way by mirroring our culture back to us by functioning pragmatically—their goal is to sell and they carefully research public

opinion to see what will and what will not sell. Advertisements only work when they somehow capture the logic of the culture for which they are intended.

Advertisers have changed their tactics because they have found appeals to the idea of individual autonomy—freedom wrapped in personal choice—powerful. By powerful, we mean they sell products. These advertisers center upon understanding demographics, which means they tailor advertisements to particular consumptive audiences. The better they hit or shape that audience, the more successful their advertisements are. Thus, when advertisers show us that personal choice among competing products is the essence of human freedom, we get a better sense that Western societies have come to believe their personal choices are ultimately important. Although this value system makes perfect sense to those who live within it, it makes less sense to those on the outside. Perhaps the justification of “jealously” put forth as a reason why terrorists bombed the World Trade Center—as many people have theorized—is our own hubris as a culture. It seems to those who live within the culture that we are the freest people ever—meaning, we have the largest number of consumer choices; but, to those who live outside this “freedom,” we might seem like pathetic slaves tied to a limited view of human value.

Schooling's Response, Teaching and Learning, and Consumptive Culture

Schools simultaneously lament and are complicit in the cultural problems we have tried to articulate. Culturally, the interests, attitudes, and self-views of children and youth have dramatically changed. Schools are both victims of this change and culprits. Students possess a consumptive identity formed by powerful and pervasive cultural elements (including their own parents) that schools could not possibly counteract on their own. That said, schools respond in ways that exacerbate the problem of citizen formation as consumer.

What Bloom (1976) has called “affective entry characteristics” (more generally known as motivation for school learning) play a part in this cultural shift. If students are ‘emotionally prepared to learn, as expressed in their interests, attitudes, and self-views,’ they are more likely to succeed in learning tasks than students who enter ‘the learning task with lack of enthusiasm and evident disinterest.’ Bloom cites evidence that affect (motivation to engage in school tasks and learn) is also alterable. Thus, “teaching, curriculum, and grading policies in the school which stress high ratios of success experiences to failure experiences should result in increased amounts of positive affective entry characteristics for subsequent related learning tasks” (Bloom, 1976, p. 105).

How can schools possibly respond to such a pervasive cultural value system when the institution is, in itself, a cultural manifestation of prevailing economic values? Is there anything in mass schooling that constitutes a critique of the consequences of our collective economic life? Success in learning supposedly breeds

success. But schooling as a system, as opposed to a place where a few heroic teachers change lives, is not set up to take Boom's advice (which is both science and art) seriously, as we have indicated earlier. Only those self-efficacious leaders who conformed to a school-defined intelligence and achievement agenda got it; the masses—the growing number of people who consider themselves “middle class” these days—are evaluated and shaped differently.

Notes

¹ It is our contention that generally the choice has been made for students by teachers and the curriculum being taught. We might call this phenomenon a deeply embedded structure of mass schooling where the institutional cultures of schools build control systems along a reward and punishment continuum based upon whether a student is viewed as alienated or committed. This system responds to students with corresponding allocations of curricular and instructional approaches that serve to categorize and classify children [see Etzioni (1975); Cicourel & Mehan (1985)].

² Toch is co-director of Education Sector, a Washington think tank, and author of “In the Name of Excellence,” a history of American education in the 1980s.

³ Author 1 critiqued the Nation at Risk report almost 23 years ago [Parsons, J. (1986). *Beyond Excellence: The Faces of Children*. *ATA Magazine*, 67(1)]. Ironically, Ronald Reagan, who has recently been venerated as a great American president, had just entered the office of President. He released the Report, but ignored the Report's recommendations in favor of his interest in school prayer.

⁴ If you can call what Republicans do theorizing—even Republicans would probably disparage of the word, although prominent think tanks continue to define and promote a conservative education policy environment (see, for example, Fredrick Hess at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research).

⁵ Author 1 can attest that the dress of young men and women can be unsettling. When visiting a northern, rural high school in Alberta, he was astonished at the revealing clothing young women were wearing around school. Many young women were dressed in startling ways. And, as a school administrator, Author 2 can attest to the unending guidance and discipline required to encourage both male and female students to conform to what were seen as responsible and legitimate dress codes.

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