

Children make you happier ... and poorer

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This article, which formed the opening keynote address of the Fifth International Conference on Children's Spirituality, addresses the place of children in the globalized social economy. It begins by arguing that current attitudes in the West towards children are conditioned by several contradictions in consumerism. Children, no longer as labourers, but as manipulated consumers, draw their own parents into the trap of globalization. This state of affairs continues because of spiritual poverty.

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Childhood and desire

Having children costs money—a lot of money. Having a child portends (for the mother, at least) a considerable loss of income and simultaneously a considerable growth of family expenditure. Unlike in times past, a child is a consumer pure and simple—it won't contribute to the family income. The charity Daycare Trust calculates that the average price of a nursery place in Britain for a child under 2 grew by the end of 2002 to £134 per week, as against the average British family income of £562 per week (Carvel, 2004). Hundreds of thousands of families are already condemned to the life of poverty. Hundreds of thousands more watch their plight and take note.

In our market-ruled society every need, desire or want has a price tag attached. Things are not to be had unless purchased, and purchasing them means that other needs and desires must wait. Children are not an exception—why should they be? On the contrary, they would leave more needs and desires waiting than almost all other purchases (and no one could tell how many and for how long). Having a child is presenting a hostage to fate or mortgaging your future, yet you have no inkling how large the repayment of your mortgage loan will be and how long it will take to repay.

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The total price is not fixed, your obligations are not explained and there is no 'money-back guarantee', in case you are not fully satisfied with the product.

In a society of buyers and sellers such reasoning sounds credible. But it does not seem to be the whole truth. The reading public pays keen attention to popular theories about love, lust and children, embracing each theory with enthusiastic zeal. For example, an expert in addictive behaviour attributes 'falling in love' and 'being in love' to the excretion of oxytocin in the brain. This is a chemical that 'makes us enjoy sex' (Spicer, 2004). The brain has internal drug factories that cause chemical cocktails to be released, activating dopamine, which makes us ecstatically happy when we are with the person we love. The snag is that the drug is produced only for a limited time—as if it had been designed to keep the couple together for as long as it takes to have sex and then raise a baby to a safe level—about two years. Or again, a rehabilitation of lust, one of the seven deadly sins, has it that we should welcome its pleasures for their own sake (Honigsbaum, 2004) and not be ashamed.

The public response to these and other messages is a most important phenomenon in its own right—a puzzle that needs to be reflected on. There is only one explanation: since as a rule people tend to listen most eagerly to such messages as they want to hear, the public's attentive response can make sense only in so far as those statements fit closely with some explicit or half-conscious wishes. I suggest that the messages (and plenty of similar examples exist) receive such grateful acceptance because of their promise to mitigate and placate the spiritual torments many people nowadays go through, and which they try to shake off or stifle in vain. 'In vain' because the distress is genuine and will not go away without an effort most people feel too inept to make or reluctant to take.

One kind of distress is a side-effect of living in a consumer society, in which the roads are many and scattered but all lead through shops. Any life pursuit, and most significantly the pursuit of dignity, self-esteem and happiness, requires market mediation; and the world in which such pursuits are inscribed is made of commodities—objects judged, appreciated or rejected by the satisfaction they bring to the world's customers. If objects fail on their promise, if the satisfaction is not complete or not as big as expected, the customers return to the shop and expect their money back. The offending objects—not living up to their promise, too awkward for trouble-free use or squeezed dry of the pleasures they were capable of giving—are disposed of. One does not swear oaths of loyalty to things whose sole purpose is to satisfy a need, desire or want. Risks cannot be avoided, but the dangers seem less once commitment is denied. This is a comforting thought, but it is also pregnant with distress when those 'things' for consumption are other human beings. When it comes to humans, commitment is hard to avoid, even if unwritten and not duly endorsed. Every encounter leaves behind a sediment of human bond, and that sediment thickens in time, enriched by memory. Interaction has no natural end; ends can only be artificially contrived, and it is far from obvious who decides when that end has arrived, since (to apply consumerist concepts) in human interaction both sides are, simultaneously, consumers and consumed, and the sovereignty of the consumer can be claimed by both. Established bonds may be broken, and further interaction refused,

but not without the bitter after-taste and a feeling of guilt. It is difficult to double-cross moral conscience.

This distress might be avoidable in a world less liquid than ours—a world changing less rapidly, one in which objects of desire do not change so swiftly or lose their allure so tragically, and a world in which human life does not seem to be split into a series of self-contained episodes and meanings. But no such world is available—and overwhelming odds militate against the exemption of human bonds from the rule of consumerist cognitive and behavioural patterns.

Indeed, the more liquid the world, the greater is our need for firm, reliable ties of friendship and mutual trust. Friends, after all, are people on whose understanding and helping hand we can count in case we stumble and fall, and in the world we inhabit even the fastest runners and most sprightly skaters are not insured against that eventuality. On the other hand, that same liquid world privileges those who travel light; if the changed circumstances require us to move fast, long-term commitments are difficult to untie and may prove a cumbersome burden. There is no good choice, then. You cannot eat your cake and have it—but this is precisely what the world in which you try to compose your life presses you to do.

Childhood and the market

Into such a world children are born, in such a world they grow, and into such a world they are expected to seek admission. Children watch us and learn. They take to heart what we adults do. After all, we are the authority. We represent the world. Jean-Francois Lyotard, the acknowledged spiritual father of the postmodern turn in our perception of the human world, insisted that it is the lot of children to represent humanity most fully: ‘shorn of speech, incapable of standing upright, hesitating over the objects of its interest, not able to calculate its advantages, not sensitive to common reason, the child is eminently the human because its distress heralds and promises the things possible’ (Lyotard, 1991, pp. 2–7). This was not Lyotard’s discovery; he merely restated a modern preoccupation with the gap yawning between the imagination and innocence of children and the mundane routine and corruption of most adult life, and with the careless way in which the spiritual powers and creative potential of children are thoughtlessly squandered. He went on to comment sadly that all the efforts of society, all the socializing pressures, bodily and mental, whether by design or default, are aimed at streamlining a process called maturation, that is of leaving childhood, with its all-too-human qualities, behind. As if the logic of human society were to run away from humanity.

Society shows little hospitality to those ‘not sensitive to common reason’, and is downright hostile to those ‘not able to calculate [their] own advantage’. Society does not take lightly to an infinity of possibilities; what else is any social order about, if not the cutting down of the number of possibilities, and stifling all the rest? The essence of all socialization is a lesson in realism: to the newborn, its newcomers, society offers admission on condition that they accept the right of reality to draw the line. The line separates some possibilities now regarded as power-assisted

probabilities from all the others, authoritatively decried as being misbegotten, vain or downright antisocial.

Since the early modern discovery of childhood as a separate and unique stage of human life, society has eulogized children for qualities (such as free play and a spirit of amity) sorely missing in adults. But at the same time, children have been viewed with deep suspicion: after all, the life of adults requires that free play is either shunned altogether or relegated to leisure time, at all other times replaced by discipline and routine; and the spirit of amity is securely constrained in the straitjacket of contractual rights and duties. Children are not to be trusted and left without vigilant supervision; 'raw childhood' needs to be processed and so 'detoxified'—purified of its natural ingredients that society would not wish or be able to ingest. In practice if not in theory, childhood is not treated as a haven or shelter, but as a simulacrum of adult life.

The kind of end-product which this processing is intended to achieve depends on the capacity in which members of society are called to service. For a better part of modern history, the part marked by massive industrial plants and conscript armies, society has shaped and groomed its male members to work and soldiering: obedience and conformity, and endurance of drudgery and monotonous routine have been the virtues cultivated. Fantasy, passion, a spirit of rebellion and reluctance to fall in line were the vices to be exterminated. It was the body of the would-be worker or soldier that counted; it was the spirit that had to be silenced, and once silenced, could be left out of account as of no consequence. A society of producers and soldiers focused its reprocessing of childhood on the management of bodies, making them fit to inhabit their natural habitat: factory floor and battlefield.

The era of the producers' society, in the prosperous West at least, is over; we live now in the society of consumers. The natural habitat is the market, the virtue to be cultivated the compulsive and addictive urge to buy. The mortal sin that needs to be exterminated, or punished by exile or banishment, is indifference to market-managed seduction or lack of resources. Accordingly, a society of consumers focuses its reprocessing of childhood on the management of spirits, to make them fit for their natural habitat, the shopping mall. Never mind the bodies—drilling them is old hat, for the 'great novelty' is the conquest and redeployment of the soul (Dufour, 2003, p. 10), betokening nothing less than 'battles over the nature of the person' (Cook, 2004, p. 149).

In a book with the tell-it-all title *What kids buy: the psychology of marketing to the kids*, Dan Acuff (1997) presented a comprehensive strategy for invading and conquering, then managing the 'kid market'—heretofore, fallow or barely cultivated land and with well-nigh infinite profit-making potential. He explains to future invaders how to create, develop and market products and programmes targeted at young people from birth through to the teen years. Acuff, and probably most of his readers, believe that by converting children to the spirit and practice of consumerism they perform a moral task, just as the pioneers of capitalist industry two centuries ago believed themselves to be moral missionaries while filling their mines and mills with child labour. Those pioneers kept children's wages so low that their long hours at work became a necessity to be obeyed as long as they lived. Today's moral missionaries, the marketing practitioners, try instead to generate in children a state of perpetual dissatisfaction by

stimulating desire for the new and redefining what preceded it as useless junk—the ultimate purpose being to reproduce the cycle of perpetual desire in which consumer capitalist childhood is embedded (Bauman, 2003).

The moral act of marketing to children has itself been re-branded, re-founding children's sacredness not as romantic innocence, but as possessing a knowing and choosing self:

The world of peer evaluations of children based on goods, media characters and product knowledge ... is increasingly coming to stand for the norm to which children and parents must conform if they are to have a 'healthy' social life. (Cook, 2004, p. 150)

The commanding role of commodity markets in raising, educating and forming children—the 'commodification of childhood' (Schor, 2003, p. 7)—is rapidly expanding and self-replicating. Children are viewed by their parents as knowledgeable about currently binding and passé fashions, and are increasingly consulted by parents when a shopping decision is to be made. And children increasingly have direct autonomous purchasing power from the primary school age (McNeal, 1999). Consumerism conditions or trains the child (Schor, 2005). It has destabilised older, more institutional identity formations such as family, church and school, and so created a vacuum that it then hurries to fill (Davis, 2003). Major selling brands deliberately take on the role of emotional connection points that allow wearers, for instance, a sense of meaning, or even foster a religious loyalty (Kunde, 2000).

Conclusion: sequestered spirituality

In this context, the child's soul is besieged by the pressures of an expansive and invasive market, stripped of its normal familial and social defences and made more vulnerable by the reversal of authority and command structures. Children's homeless and free-floating needs are harnessed to the 'great brands'; human loyalty is replaced by brand loyalty in shaping the life expectations and skills of the consumers.

There is ample research evidence showing that 'insecurity—both financial and emotional—lies at the heart of consumerist cravings' (de Angelis, 2004). There is a need for psychology to shift its focus from individual behaviour to the social settings in which a child becomes a compulsive shopper or consumer. Children are the victims of corporate culture, and should not bear the whole blame.

Spirituality may be a child's birth gift, but it has been sequestered by the consumer markets and then redeployed to lubricate the wheels of a consumer economy. Childhood, as Kiku Adatto has suggested, has become merely a preparatory stage for the selling of the self, as children are trained to see all relationships, including friendship and family, through the prism of marketing-generated perceptions and evaluations.

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Aviv and Leeds, as well as numerous faculty memberships and honours from universities in Europe and North America. He has written on postmodernity, moral values in society, the holocaust, freedom, globalization and class. From his many published works, those which most closely touch on the themes discussed here include *Intimations of postmodernity* (1992), *Postmodern ethics* (1995), *Postmodernity and its discontents* (1997), *Globalisation: the human consequences* (1998), *Liquid modernity* (2000), *Liquid love: on the frailty of human bonds* (2003), and *Wasted lives: modernity and its outcasts* (2003).

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