

# CONSUMER SOCIETY, COMMODIFICATION OF CHILDHOOD AND CURRENT CHALLENGES FOR EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the current challenges facing education, given the growing process of commodification of childhood by consumer society. From the presentation of key concepts such as alienation, competition, consumption and new electronic media, elements that shape social relations of contemporary society, the paper first discusses the process of social reification as a phenomenon leading to the creation of a society dominated by production and distribution of goods. Secondly the analysis focuses on the school as an important locus of production and reproduction of market forces and the constant process of transformation of education into a commodity. The new media are then analyzed as essential tools in this new phase of development of productive forces, with discussion of alternatives for confronting this phenomenon by the school, among which the need for ongoing investment in the critical and reflective skills of the students stands out, seen as the only effective instrument against the process of alienation. The article then analyzes the need for professionals in the school environment who are qualified to develop this work, as well as the importance of integration of the whole school community in a political pedagogical project for this purpose.*

**KEYWORDS:** *political pedagogical project, commodification of childhood.*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Three basic elements shape contemporary social relations: consumption, competition and technology, and children are influenced by these elements at an early age, at the same time in which they become accustomed to routine use of technology and to speed in the spread of information. These social changes have an impact on childhood and new generations, with direct consequences for the school; the pedagogical project must adapt to the new demands of a student profile which is a reflection of a competitive, consumer and technologically interconnected society.

Social behavior and forms of interaction with knowledge have radically changed in the past two decades, largely due to technological, social and economic advances that have occurred in this period; this is a worldwide process that cannot be reversed. Nevertheless, schools still widely use traditional teaching and learning processes, and there is the clear need for adjustment of the pedagogical practices applied by the school to the new demands imposed by society.

A significant part of the appeals from the industry of consumption are aimed at children, which is reflected in formation of personalities and in new values and judgments in future societies (LINN, 2006). In this process, electronic media perform an increasingly fundamental role, using ever more effective strategies for persuasion and forming of new consumers.

According to LINN (2006), children as a group are responsible for purchases of around US\$ 15 billion per year, and children exercise influence on adult purchasing of around US\$600 billion. In a market directed almost exclusively to toys, the range of options provided to children changes from one moment to the next, and the excess of offerings brings along "disposability" of products as a major characteristic. Soon after the purchase, the pleasurable sensation soon fades away and is replaced by a compulsive desire for a new purchase, with effects on the structure of a personality in formation and for future generations.

In this process, television is largely responsible for this new standard of consumption. Data from Ibope (Brazilian public opinion agency) presented by LINN (2006) show us that Brazilian children and youth, up to 17 years of age, watch on average 3.5 hours of television per day, with exposure to around 40 thousand advertisements a year. In spite of the importance of this vehicle in education through educational programs, often with excellent didactic methods, it also greatly encourages aspects like violence and uncontrolled consumption.

According to authors such as McNeal (2000, p. 11), market strategies are principally aimed at children insofar as they are a type of consumer that represents three market forms: first, a primary market of consumers that spend their own money according to their desires and needs; second, a market of influence that directs their parents' spending of money for their own benefit; and third, a future market of all goods and services that, if developed from then on, will provide for a constant flow of new consumers.

Thus, the author presents what he has called the five stages of development of consumer behavior in children:

STAGE	AVERAGE AGE	SUMMARY
Observation	2 months	Through the senses and the influence of parents, the child creates his/her own impressions regarding the commercial world as a source of products that satisfy his/her needs. In this stage, essentially edible products stand out.
Request	2 years	Characterized by development of the ability of children in requesting articles of consumption, mainly food products.
Selection	3 ½ years	Picking up products that satisfy his/her needs from a commercial source through his/her own efforts.
Co-acquisition	5 ½ years	First purchase (exchange) of a product without effective assistance from parents.
Acquisition	8 years	Performs the complete act of purchasing in an independent manner.

Evidently, diverse conditions affect each child's reaction to advertising (above all connected with free-to-air television, cable television and Internet), among which the most important are time of exposure to it, previous knowledge and experiences and the family environment.

In short, the field of consumer activity is no longer simply an area of economic activity, but constitutes a field of production of new meanings and symbolic forms.

This article deals with the challenges faced by education currently before the growing process of commodification of childhood by consumer society. From the presentation of key concepts such as alienation, fetishism, competition, consumption and new electronic media, elements that shape the social relations of contemporary society, the paper first discusses the process of social reification as a phenomenon leading to the creation of a society dominated by production and distribution of goods. Secondly the analysis focuses on the school as an important locus of production and reproduction of market forces and the constant process of transformation of education into a commodity. The new media are then analyzed as essential tools in this new phase of development of productive forces, with discussion of alternatives for confronting this phenomenon by the school, among which the need for ongoing investment in the critical and reflective skills of the students stands out, seen as the only effective instrument against the process of alienation. The importance of integration of the whole school community in a political pedagogical project for this purpose is then analyzed.

## **2.0 ALIENATION AND FETISHISM IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

The literature that deals with the phenomenon of alienation in the modern world is vast, above all the literature from a Marxist perspective; alienation is seen as a phenomenon resulting from dominant material factors in society, more specifically in the capitalist system. In it, human labor occurs so as to produce articles that are immediately separated from the interests and the reach of those who make them, to be converted, without distinction, into commodities. The consequence of alienation in the world of work, for Marx, is transformation of the subjects themselves into commodities and the reification of social relations, a phenomenon that the author calls fetishism. Thus people act as things, and things as people (Max, 2008).

Seen by Marx as a characteristic inherent to capitalist society, fetishism results from a process of autonomization of production of commodities, which occurs apart from the will of the producers, and makes alienation in bourgeois society assume the peculiar characteristic of leading people to idolatry objects and to desire to possess them no matter what.

Among the mechanisms which exist for reproduction of this phenomenon is advertising, whose main strategy is to create an identity of the product with the consumer, dehumanizing him/her, and the goal is achieved as of the moment that the product is consumed, the time at which the person may then enjoy the sensation of humanization which is delivered through its use. Money is thus transformed into the main fetish of our times because it allows the sensation of possessing all that we desire.

Contemporary society has found a kind of relief for its ills in consumption, promising comfort and satisfaction through the acquisition of the most diverse goods. Insofar as people themselves are transformed into things, even interpersonal relationships come to obey the logic of materialization and, through the acquisition of products, one seeks to achieve emotional stability and self-affirmation. Thus, the act of having and accumulating has come to hold in itself the balm for the main problems that afflict us, and the new technologies and new models of behavior and worship of standards of beauty and health have come to shape new consumption patterns. The act of consumption then comes to constitute not only the space for economic activity, but also the production of symbolic forms and meanings.

The phenomenon of alienation and fetishism, although found spread throughout all dimensions of social life, does not constitute the product of a collective consciousness, but rather a fragmented one, atomized, of isolated individuals, whose bond of communication occurs through things, including therein individuals themselves that have transformed themselves into it.

### **3.0 EDUCATION, ALIENATION AND FETISHISM**

As of this initial discussion, István Mészáros' work, "A Educação para Além do Capital" ("Education Beyond Capital"), may be useful to consider processes for overcoming alienation and fetishism. In this work, education constitutes a fundamental element for an alternative political-social project because overcoming alienation may only be performed by means of what has been called self-conscious activity. This constitutes the center point for us to advance from a situation of fragmentation, submission, reification and estrangement before our own material creations and our fellow human beings to a time in which we will be able to fully develop ourselves to the point of becoming truly rich in the qualitative sense of the word.

This is not a work of purely and simply combatting the process of commodification of teaching where the school, as part of the true "Shopping Center" into which contemporary society has been transformed, is placed at the service of consumption and profit. It is combating, by means of critical reflection, the forms of mystifications that relate human beings with the products of their work, autonomizing the products and bestowing them with human properties. This process is at the base of alienation and production of fetishes, essential elements of capitalism as a system.

Educating beyond capital means, for Mészáros, a project that seeks to bring forth a society able to fashion conscientious and free persons, capable of complete fulfillment as human beings. For that reason, it is necessary that we create a political-pedagogical project that has, as a pillar, a type of sociability based on the conscientious action of people and on the critique and denial of an opposite logic that reigns in society as a whole and not only in the formal environments of education.

In that sense, it is important for this action that teaching institutions and those that participate in them, the school community, critically understand such a process, so as to conscientiously take part in seeking a project which is, above all, emancipating - an education that is not

simply directed to business dealings, but toward creation, which beyond qualifying one for the market, qualifies one for life.

#### **4.0 THE POLITICAL-PEDAGOGICAL PROJECT FOR A LIBERATING EDUCATION**

The Political-Pedagogical Project (PPP) constitutes a document that, after being formulated should serve as a guide for all the actions developed in the school, and its creation should occur in a collective manner. That way, participative planning is an essential instrument for this construction as a product of participation of the school community. One of the main theorists of PPP in Brazil, Vasconcellos (2000, p. 169) affirms that the PPP “may be understood as systematization, though never definitive, of a process of Participative Planning, which is improved and concretized in process, which clearly defines the type of educational activity one wishes to perform.” Through this instrument, educators, students and the community in general are able to see themselves as historical actors in constructing a new model of society, more fully exercising their citizenship. A PPP must respond to a determined context, which, after being analyzed by the school community, allows goals to be drawn up with a specific work methodology, and with monitoring and assessment mechanisms.

The actions contained in the PPP may then join the product of critical reflection of social reality to teachers’ knowledge, providing students with the critical dimension necessary for breaking through the fragmented, partial and restricted vision that exists of the context in which they live before society as a whole, with a view toward its transformation. Thus, critical knowledge allows students to act so as to construct their realities in a conscientious manner, breaking away from the alienating and fetishistic nature that distinguishes contemporary society.

According to Fullan (2009, p. 85), “[...] change in school is technically simple and socially complex”. That is because the process of change requires motivation and involvement of the entire school community, the basis for establishment of a PPP. Perrenoud (2005) considers that the main mission of the school is currently divided into three areas:

- Promotion of equality: working in such a way that all may have access to development of the basic skills that should be transmitted by the school.

- Citizenship: developing productive citizens in solidarity in an environment where all collaborate with each other.
- Effectiveness: acting in the best manner possible, always giving the most of oneself.

The first step for school to adapt to the demands of contemporary society is participative management, with a focus on communication with all the actors that participate in the school community. Casassus (2009, p. 161) understands communication as “a meaningful exchange”; thus, the interrelation of the school with parents, students, teachers and the community must be guided toward constructing a political-pedagogical project that has the collaboration of all those involved or affected by the teaching-learning process, in which Martins (2010, p. 31) calls for concerns for “[...] their internal and external interactions”.

This thinking is in accord with a study from UNESCO, according to which “[...] education must therefore constantly adapt to these changes in society, without neglecting life experience, basic wisdom and the results of human experience” (UNESCO, 1996, p. 14).

Valuing of education in the modern productive system does not change the essence of capitalism, but introduces a new way of thinking, in which opportunities are granted to those who are able to take in knowledge by means of school experience. When the school is able to perform this effective action, it collaborates socially in reducing exploitation of labor and lends support to citizenship by means of dignified work (KURZ, 1992 apud DEMO, 2009). If the school obtains this positive result, the affirmation of UNESCO (1996, p. 12) is validated, which considers that:

Nothing can replace the formal system of education, which ensures to each one initiation in the most varied subjects of knowledge; nothing can replace the relationship to authority, nor the dialogue between teacher and student. It thus belongs to the teacher to transmit to the student all that humanity has already learned in regard to itself and nature, in addition to the essential things which it has created and invented.

It belongs to education to prepare the individual no longer to obey and act according to orders, but to know how to deal with the unforeseen, with new situations, and to innovate. That way, education will be able to fashion a citizen capable of reducing the social inequalities that are superimposed between the forces of capital and labor; and also achieve its main goal of promoting citizenship and social equality.

According to Demo (2009), educational quality must have universal access to basic educational knowledge as a requirement, because only this universal access is able to ensure all of conditions for social participation and production, generation of critical information, constant updating and interpretation of reality, which is also considered as the most important tool for a worker in the current labor market.

Creating, implementing and managing a political-pedagogical project which promotes such changes in the learning process is the greatest challenge the school encounters for shaping its essence to the demands of this century, which requires that the school educates individuals to fit within these new times which are governed by uncontrolled consumption, by competition and by technology under the hegemony of capitalism.

Educational policy in Brazil has not remained silent in relation to this process. The country has advanced in terms of educational policy in the last 15 years, but this has been, above all, quantitative; there is now the preeminent need for a qualitative evolution (VELOSO, 2009). In this respect, it is important to pay attention to what is stated in the report of UNESCO (1996, p. 19-21), according to which:

[...] profuse reforms end up as ineffective because they do not provide the system with the time necessary to be permeated with the new spirit, nor to create the conditions so that all actors participate in its implementation. [...] In this context, it is appropriate to add some recommendations related to the teacher education content itself, with their full access to ongoing education, with revaluing of the status of teachers responsible for basic education and with greater involvement of teachers in less favored and marginalized social environments; it is precisely in these environments that they are able to contribute to more successful insertion of youth and adolescents in society. In addition to well trained educators and teachers, the educational system makes the necessary tools available for ensuring quality education: books, state-of-the-art means of communication, cultural and economic environment of the school.

A pedagogical project directed to the education of a critical individual who is able to exercise citizenship should aim at the goal of developing abilities directed to autonomous creation of the learning process by means of instruments that allow the student to learn to cooperate, to act in synergy, to work in a team, to share leadership, to analyze situations in a systematic way and to construct and coordinate organizations and systems of collective and democratic action. Sátiro (2011) considers

the school as the place of political intervention, which presents the possibility of creating new paradigms, transformation of society and education of a participative, creative, critical and responsible citizen.

## **5.0 CONSIDERATIONS**

The purpose of this article was to discuss some of the challenges currently faced by education, among which the growing process of commoditization of childhood stands out. Aspects of this phenomenon in childhood were discussed, as well as key concepts for its understanding, such as alienation, fetishism and consumerism.

From analysis of literature on the theme, which highlights the forming of a critical consciousness regarding this phenomenon as a principal instrument, the article analyzed how teaching institutions can implant actions for the purpose of understanding such process in such a way as to construct a new type of sociability in a conscientious manner based on freedom and on emancipation.

The Political-Pedagogical Project, due to its characteristic of participation of the community in school direction, was seen as an effective instrument for such purpose, as long as it has work founded on the critical education of students and negation of the logic reigning in society as a whole, and in the school in particular, as a fundamental element, aiming at fashioning conscientious and free persons, capable of complete fulfillment as human beings.

The challenges present herein are immense, above all because of the proposal for transforming education that was traditionally and fundamentally directed to the work market, to consumerism, to extreme individualism and to immediate use into a new formation, based on a view of the world guided by critical reflection and by new social, political and ethical values, which lay a foundation for full citizenship and collective life.

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