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A Critical Pedagogy against Consumer Capitalism A Normative Approach

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Abstract

Critical pedagogues have extensively criticized the commercialization of education; however, their argument has remained at the level of critique. As will be argued, a normative conception of a deep socialist democracy based upon human flourishing is needed in order for critical pedagogues to critique consumer capitalism's impact on education. However, critical pedagogues have not developed this position, thus they are unable to normatively describe the problems of a commercialized education. This paper fills this gap by providing a normative, yet critical, argument against the commercialization of education. The first section defines normative theory and explains the scope of this paper. Section two sets up the argument by clarifying terms. Section three explains critical pedagogy's argument against a commercialized education and why this argument is normatively inconsistent. Section four briefly develops the argument for a deep socialist democracy and outlines a normative framework for a critical pedagogy against consumerism.



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Critical pedagogy, like any ‘critical’ theory, is premised on a commitment to human emancipation, via human flourishing (Cooke, 2006, 2006; Ray & Sayer, 1999). For years now, Jürgen Habermas (1987), Nancy Fraser (1997), and others have argued that the fundamental aspect distinguishing *all* critical theories from other theories is the scholar’s commitment to use their theories to shed light upon forms of domination and oppression, while advancing human emancipation. In this regard, all critical theories must rest upon robust and explicit normative principles: Without these principles critical theory is no different from descriptive analysis.

While critical pedagogy has provided invaluable educational insight on the multiple ways power operates between society and schools, critical research has not grounded these arguments within a rich normative conception of democracy (Liston, 1988; Strike, 1989). Recently I criticized the book *Critical Pedagogy of Consumption* for lack of such a foundation (Author, 2010). This paper picks up on this criticism by providing a normative framework for a ‘critical pedagogy against consumerism’. A normative framework, in this sense, means developing reasonable justifications for regulating the commodification of education and for educating children to challenge consumer capitalism. In particular, this paper explains the normative reasons for regulating consumer capitalism’s impact upon K-12 education.¹ Thus, this paper will be organized as follows: The first section defines normative theory and explains the scope of this paper. The second section will clarify key terms within the consumerist debate. The third sections teases out the normative inconsistencies embedded within the book *Critical Pedagogies of Consumption*. And the fourth section provides a normative framework for a ‘critical pedagogy against consumerism’, embedded within the concept human flourishing.

Normative Theory and the Critical Tradition

Since normative theory is central to my argument, and the term normative theory might be unknown to some critical pedagogues, I want to briefly explain what normative theory is and why normative theory is necessary to critical pedagogy. All critical theories, as Seyla Benhabib (1986) argues, have at least two interconnected assessments: *an explanatory-diagnostic assessment* and *an anticipatory-utopian assessment*. The *explanatory-diagnostic* assessment of critical theory empirically describes and critiques the various ways in which oppression and domination are produced and reproduced. In addition, such an assessment aims to describe the social movements and structural arrangements available for challenging domination and advancing human flourishing. In short, this shall be termed the *descriptive aspect* of critical theory. The *anticipatory-utopian assessment* of a critical social theory normatively explains the contours of human emancipation and the harms caused by various forms of domination and oppression. For clarity, I will call this the *prescriptive or normative aspect* of critical theory (See Benhabib, 1986).

While analytically separate, the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of critical theory *must* be intertwined: a critical theory, of any sort, cannot explain and diagnose domination and oppression without a normative theory because domination and oppression are normative ideas (See Cudd, 2006; Lovett, 2010). And by “normative ideas” I mean these concepts are used to describe why certain situations are morally wrong and undermine basic democratic principles (See Sayer, 2000, pp. 172–189; Swift, 2000). Conversely, a critical theory cannot be anticipatory or utopian without empirically analyzing the harms occurring within society and the real

¹Since this paper is aimed towards a critical audience I will not expand upon the unjust nature of capitalism.

possibilities for social transformation (Antonio, 1981; Bohman, 1993, 2012; Habermas, 1990; Rehg, 2009; Sayer, 2000).

Normative theory, then, is a form of philosophical inquiry extending from the anticipatory or utopian aspect of critical theory; and as such, the purpose of normative theory is to explain what is just/unjust or morally right/wrong. In philosophical terms, normative theory aims to explain what are reasonable and unreasonable uses of power (See Forst, 2011). The primary purpose of normative theory is not to explain “what exists” *per se*, but rather to explain “what ought to exist and why”. Explaining what ought to exist and why is a difficult task, which requires philosophical inquiry. Moreover, and one underlining argument of this paper, is that normative philosophical inquiry is neglected by critical pedagogues, which in turn ensnares them within philosophical binds and problems. Thus, the intent of this paper is to use normative theory to achieve two purposes: 1) To explain how critical pedagogy’s failure to engage in normative theory has led it into philosophical binds and problems in its critique of consumer capitalism’s impact upon education. 2) To provide a general, yet philosophically defensible framework for critiquing the impact of consumer capitalism on education.

To better frame my paper, I want to clarify four points I am *not* addressing. First, my paper *cannot* fully explain “what is normative theory?” While I have provided a general definition of normative theory and explained its place within the critical tradition, beyond such general definition, and without writing a book, normative theory is better explained by listening to and reading how normative theorists make and justify their arguments (See Turner, 2010). In this regard, my paper shall explain the value of normative theory by doing normative theory; more specifically, by providing a framework for critical scholars to critique consumer capitalism. Second, I am not saying education “is” governed by the normative principle discussed below. Of course, the dominant discourse around public education is embedded within the frames of neoliberalism and consumer capitalism, which are far from the principles of a deep socialist democracy (See Apple, 2006). My intent, however, is to provide a stronger framework upon which critical pedagogues can critique the harms of consumer capitalism. Third, I am not assuming most teachers are critical, or even that teachers ought to be critical. Instead, my paper is directed towards scholars who self-identify as being critical. Thus, my focus is as follows: if you are a critical scholar, human flourishing and a deep socialist democracy ought to be the normative foundation used to critique consumer capitalism. Finally, I am not focusing on the current professional ethos and dominant discussion within schools *per se*; while I do briefly address these issues, my paper is grounded within the prescriptive aspect of critical theory. As a result, I can only provide a framework for normatively critiquing the dominant discussion of consumer capitalism. To apply this framework to specific cases requires a different paper, if not a book. In sum, my paper is making the modest argument that a normative theory provides the philosophical tools necessary for critiquing consumer capitalism’s impact upon education. With these brief remarks out of the way, let us begin analytically unpacking certain concepts.

Analytical Clarity

To begin, let’s distinguish *consumerism* from *consumer capitalism*. *Consumerism* simply is the process of consuming goods, and a consumer good is anything intended for exchange (Ertman & Williams, 2005). Consumerism occurs in any social situation in which individuals are exchanging and consuming goods and services. Consumer societies have existed, and will exist, under this definition so long as social practices within a society are supportive of consumer

practices. Therefore, we cannot assume consumerism is only tied to capitalist societies or that all consumer practices are wrong. Furthermore, we can reasonably assume even a just society will depend upon a certain amount of consumer practices. In this sense, no justification exists for assuming consumerism is inherently a negative process: It simply is a function associated with any society that exchanges goods and services (Ertman & Williams, 2005).

Consumer capitalism, on the other hand, is a particular type of society permeated with unjust class structures and social lives dominated by consumer lifestyles, wherein a person's well-being and happiness depend, to a large extent, on their consumption habits (Bauman, 2005, 2007, 2009). Consumer capitalism creates these lifestyles by reconfiguring social spaces—schools, the internet, media outlets, and the body—in ways which reproduce consumer practices which are tied to the maximization of profit (Lowe, 1995). This reconfiguration of social space is what we shall call *commodity contexts*, which are various social arenas within or between discursive units that link consumer practices to the commodity process (Ertman & Williams, 2005). Simply put, commodity contexts are commodified social spaces that attempt to link our identities (who we are) to consumer practice (what we buy); thus turning our identities into an exchange value wherein buying and selling lifestyles becomes part of the accumulation process (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007; Lowe, 1995).

Separating consumerism from consumer capitalism is normatively essential for two reasons: First, to distinguish between consumerist practices vital for the healthy reproduction of any society versus those practices harmful to society—especially practices tied to consumer capitalism. Second, such a distinction allows us to identify the specific harms caused by consumer capitalism: To recognize the mechanisms within consumer capitalism which are eroding democracy by allotting more leverage to certain individuals which can be used to unfairly influence or circumvent the democratic process. While this premise is implied within critical pedagogy, the connection between capitalism and the erosion of democracy is often underspecified, primarily because such arguments are not normatively grounded. In this regard, my argument is merely to clarify the connection between consumer capitalism and the corrosion of democracy, and hence strengthen critical pedagogy rather than fundamentally challenging the critical pedagogical tradition. In addition, such normative clarity will provide critical pedagogy with more theoretical clarity for determining which particular social spaces or social relationships can become commodified (Wright & Rogers, 2010).

In this regard, a normative critical pedagogy against consumerism must be capable of identifying the mechanisms within capitalism that undermine our collective ability to democratically control the educational context, as well as explain the impact that commercialization has upon the democratic purpose of education (Gutmann, 1999). More specifically, to identify the harms consumerism has upon education two issues must be addressed 1) the type of consumer practices that are being reproduced and 2) the conditions under which they are produced. Yet to clarify the importance of these issues, we need to investigate the normative inconsistencies within a critical pedagogy of consumerism.

The Normative Inconsistencies within a Critical Pedagogy of Consumerism

Critical scholars tend to assume that the commodity process is inherently corrosive to justice or flourishing, but little normative analysis is provided to justify these claims (Sandlin &

McLaren, 2009). Thus, before we develop a normative critical pedagogy against consumerism, we need to investigate the general arguments critical pedagogues make against consumerism. Here, I shall focus on the normative inconsistencies within the book *Critical Pedagogies of Consumption* (Sandlin & McLaren, 2009). I focus on this book for two reasons. First, this book is the most recent investigation into a critical pedagogy of consumerism; thus, it is a prime illustration of the current state of normative theory within critical pedagogy. And second, it's an excellent example of how and why normative theory can assist in bridging some of the theoretical gaps within critical pedagogy.

First of all, *Critical Pedagogies of Consumption* is an edited volume, drawing upon different theoretical traditions and addressing a variety of consumer issues. Therefore, to streamline my argument I will draw out the common normative arguments made within this book and explain some inconsistencies. However, to make my argument clear I must make two moves: one theoretical and one analytical. On the theoretical end, because this book is divided between a postmodern and a Marxist approach to consumerism, I need to normatively bridge this gap. While on the analytical end, our focus is simply on the relationship between consumer capitalism and K-12 education, even though this book addressed a variety of consumer contexts.

To bridge the gap between the Marxist and Postmodernist positions presented in the book, a couple of facts need noting. First, consumer capitalism is not an individual problem, *per se*; rather, it is a systematic problem caused by capitalism's ability to link individual desires with consumer practices, thus creating lifestyles based upon consumption (Bauman, 2007). Critical pedagogues can sometimes conflate the individual act of consumption with consumerism tied to structural problems within capitalism. Consequently, critical pedagogues can be unclear where their critique of consumerism resides. Secondly, and extending from the first point, both theoretical approaches within this book assumed that consumerism is the problem, thus failing to distinguish between consumerism and consumer capitalism. As a result, both theoretical positions are stuck in what I shall call *the paradox of consumerism*, which is as follows: Consumerism is necessary for basic social living and individuals gain agency in the consumer lifestyle; however, consumerism reproduces capital. Thus, the paradox resides in trying to find a way to critique consumerism without undermining the agency individuals gain within consumer capitalism.

An example of the paradox of consumerism is illustrated in the difference between McLaren's Marxist approach and Sandlin's Postmodernist approach to consumerism. In this debate, Sandlin advocates for a 'critical postmodernist' perspective on consumerism, in which she acknowledges the "pleasurable, expressive, and performative aspects of the consumer", while acknowledging the "hegemonic aspect of consumerism as well" (Sandlin & McLaren, 2009, p. 11). However, McLaren takes a Marxist approach by seeing consumerism as inherently tied to capitalist production (Sandlin & McLaren, 2009, p. 11). In the end, these two positions are deadlocked because they are unable to identify the actual harm of consumer capitalism.

To move beyond this deadlock we need to recognize the "pleasurable, expressive and performative aspect of the consumer" as being part of the structural aspect of capitalism, and therefore the agency individuals gain by 'buying' identities is part of the flexibility of capitalism and contributes to the maximization of profit. Capitalism, in this sense, has traversed beyond notions of 'false consciousness' and has tapped into consumer's conscious desires, thus turning our desires into exchange practices (Lowe, 1995). In other words, capitalism has turned our

emotions into modes of production, making our sense of agency part of the accumulation process (Willis, 1990).

For example Kenway and Bullen (2009) explain how consumer culture narrates the skin by creating ‘second skins’, which are the skins “that mediate the relationship between product and consumer, self and other” (p. 158). This ‘second skin’ is the skin women and girls attempt to achieve in order to maintain the “sleek, smooth, blemish-, hair-, and pigment-free perfection of the advertisement” (p. 158). What Kenway and Bullen are illustrating are the complex relationships between our desires (in this case sleek and smooth skin) and the social conditions under which those desires are produced (capitalism). Thus, women who desire this ‘second skin’ are not automatons, they are quite conscious of the social value of this skin (Health, 2001); nonetheless, this agency gained is part of the commercial institution of selling ‘second skins’.

The commodification of ‘second skin’ is not a conflict between individual agency and capitalism; it is a structural problem within capitalism and it is ability to link our desires to particular forms of agency (e.g. second skin) and the purchasing of consumer lifestyles. And this link is occurring at the expense of democracy and human flourishing. By acknowledging the link between consumer desires and capitalism, we can concede that agency is gained under capitalism but this agency is tied to the structural nature of capitalism.

In this case, McLaren is right to emphasize the Marxist aspect of consumerism, because consumer capitalism is a structural problem, in which its competitive tendencies incentivize the need to maximize profit. As such, companies face a greater need to commodify social contexts—like education or skin. To state this somewhat simplistically, since capitalists control the means and distribution of production and the incentive structure of capitalism is to maximize profit, capitalists will need to commodify new social arenas in order to increase the accumulation process. This being true, we can subsume Sandlin’s postmodernism critique under the Marxist framework by following Jameson’s (1991) analysis that ‘postmodernism is the cultural logic of late-capitalism’. As Jameson explains, “postmodernism is the sheer consumption of sheer commodification as a process.” (1991, p. x) What Jameson means by this statement is that capitalism’s propensity to open new spaces to the commodity process has a dialectical affect, wherein new spaces of agency are opened while simultaneously turning those spaces of agency into sheer consumption practices.

In subsuming postmodernism under a Marxist framework, we can handle the contradictory nature of consumer desires more readily, by acknowledging that part of the logic of capitalism is to turn our desires into exchange value, which then function as mechanisms to reproduce capital. In addition, by placing the postmodernist position within a Marxist framework we can avoid the ‘paradox of consumerism’ by focusing on capitalism itself. Thus, rather than searching hopelessly for a balance within the paradox of consumerism we can skip to the heart of the problem: the ways in which capitalism blocks individuals from having a real and effective ability to democratically control their social environment (Rostboll, 2009). This focus, consequently, turns our attention to structural changes needed to advance a deep socialist democracy, rather than simply focusing on the individual act of consumption. However, the case for a deep socialist democracy will be addressed shortly.

Beyond the paradox of consumerism, other normative inconsistencies within this book need noting. Here our attention shall turn to Giroux’s (2010; 2009) essay critiquing Disney. To Giroux’s credit his essay is intended as a cultural critique of Disney, rather than a normative

analysis. As he states, the aim is to provide the reader with “a set of tools that enable them to inquire into what Disney represents” (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 11).² However, much of Giroux’s cultural critique of Disney is really a normative critique; yet, his normative claims are not explicitly developed. By this I mean, Giroux’s cultural critique is passing for a normative analysis but is lacking the normative rigor to explicitly spell out Disney’s impact on democracy.

For example, Giroux claims that Disney is “reshaping public memory, national identity, gender roles, and childhood values” (p. 12). But, what does this mean? And why does this matter? Thus, what are of normative issues behind concepts like ‘public memory’, ‘national identity’, ‘gender roles’, and ‘childhood values’ that we ought to care about? Giroux makes it seem as if these things are valuable in and of themselves, as if our common sense suffices for determining the value of public memory or childhood. When Giroux does give a normative analysis it appears as follows:

As market culture [Disney] permeates the social order, it threatens to cancel out the tension between market values and those values representative of civil society that cannot be measured in commercial terms but that are critical to democracy, values such as justice, freedom, equality, health, respect and the rights of citizens as equal and free human beings. Without such values, students are relegated to the role of economic machines, and the growing disregard for public life is left unchecked (2009, p. 253).

However, this statement is vague: How is Disney turning particular social processes into commodity contexts, and why is this harmful to children? What are the mechanisms Disney implements to negatively influence democracy? And, where is the normative connection between ‘the market’, ‘values representative of civic society that cannot be measured in commercial terms’ and students as ‘economic machines’?

I am not saying Disney is a progressive corporation; rather my claim is Giroux has failed to provide the normative analysis needed to link Disney to the ‘thinning-out of democracy’ (See Cunningham, 1987). Giroux tries to make normative arguments by relying on everyday notions of ideas like ‘childhood’ or ‘justice’ in order to critique Disney, but this isn’t rich enough to explain the direct or indirect harm Disney has on ‘childhood’ or ‘civic society’. For Giroux’s critique to have normative salience he needs to explain how Disney uses their power to directly or indirectly undermine the well-being of children or of democracy. To do so would require a theory of well-being and of democracy (See Griffin, 1989; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2011). In addition, we would need to explain why the regulation of Disney should trump other important democratic values: e.g. freedom of speech or the right to property. In the end, in order to better understand Giroux’s argument we need a robust normative theory capable of capturing the harms of capitalism and its impact on education.

Towards A Normative Critical Pedagogy against Consumerism

While Giroux’s essay is only one example, *Critical Pedagogies of Consumerism* as a whole lacked the normative rigor needed to explain the ways ‘consumer capitalism’ commodifies

² This essay comes from a chapter in Giroux’s book *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (2010), upon which I will also draw.

social spaces at the expense of human flourishing or democracy. To make this argument, a normative critique of consumer capitalism must explain how capitalism limits our collective ability to democratically control the means and distributions of production. In our case, such a normative analysis requires explaining why the social spaces of education should remain free from, or at least have a limit amount of, commodity practices occurring within said space (O'Neill, 1998). More specifically, such a framework requires identifying the mechanisms within capitalism that undermine the democratic function of education.

Developing the normative framework for a critical pedagogy against consumerism requires briefly explaining the connection between a deep socialist democracy and human flourishing. First of all, a *flourishing life*, generally speaking, consists of the ability to reasonably narrate one's life in relationship to 'the good life'. Such a life requires having the capabilities to develop properly and fully, which includes growing, maturing, and making full use of one's potential, capabilities, and faculties (Douglas, 1999; Harman, 1983; Kraut, 2009; White, 2002).³ In addition, a flourishing life depends upon having a real and effective capacity to engage in the deliberative process so that individuals are able to reasonably and collectively control their social environment, including the context of education.

Socialism expands democracy, thus expanding flourishing, by providing individuals with more opportunities to collectively control the means and distribution of production, which includes collectively controlling the degree to which contexts, like education, should be commodified (Cunningham, 1987, 1994; Levine, 1988; Wright, 2010). Socialism, in this sense, is the deepening of democracy into the economic sphere, which also entails allowing democratic bodies to control the commodity practices allowed in schools. Thus, human flourishing is advanced within a deep socialist democracy, more so than in capitalism, because it allows individuals more control over their social environment, which in turn expands the social arenas through which individuals can reasonably narrate their life (Cunningham, 1987). I realize this is somewhat of a thin argument for socialism; however, this paper is not intended to convince critical pedagogues *that* socialism is valuable; rather the purpose is to convey the value of normative theory *to* critical pedagogues who already agree with the principles of a deep socialist democracy. To develop a more robust justification for socialism would require a separate book (See Burczak, 2006; A. Cudd & Holmstrom, 2011; Green, 1999; Keane, 1984; Rostboll, 2009).

Thus, the task of a critical pedagogy against consumerism is to explain how consumer capitalism undermines the democratic function of education. For clarity, we can split the democratic function of education into three principles: 1) *the democratic principle*; 2) *the flourishing principle*, and 3) *the transformative principle*. Due to space, I cannot fully develop these principles, so I will sketch their normative implications and briefly explain how these principles overcome the paradox of consumerism.

The Democratic Principle

The democratic principle is the idea that all commercial practices within schools must be democratically approved before they enter into the educational context. In addition, individuals should be provided with a real and effective opportunity to control activities occurring within

³ This definition is indebted to Richard Kraut. However, my definition differs insofar as I conceive of flourishing intersubjectively. See: Richard Kraut, *What Is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

education (Honneth & Farrell, 1998). Thus, the aim of this principle is to provide individuals with the ability to control the content and context of the educational process. This also means having the ability to collectively control what and how commercial practices are allowed in schools (Apple & Aasen, 2003; Fung, 2003). This principle would allow schools to democratically regulate commercial processes like fundraising activities, incentive programs, exclusive agreements, appropriation of spaces, sponsorship programs and activities, sponsored educational material, and electronic marketing after reasonable deliberation occurs (Molnar, Boninger, Wilkinson, & Fogarty, 2009).

This principle avoids the ‘paradox of consumerism’ by focusing our attention on the relationship between democracy and consumerism. Thus, rather than assuming that commercialism within education is inherently bad, here we are identifying the mechanisms that companies use to circumvent or undermine the democratic process in order to enter into the educational environment. Focusing on mechanisms is normatively important because it clarifies the link between the commercialization of education and the thinning of democracy (Elster, 2007; Hedström & Swedberg, 1998). Furthermore, failing to provide such normative specificity tends to result in hasty judgments and overgeneralizations. Such problems are seen in Alex Molnar (2009; 2005) book *In School Commercialism*. For instance, Molnar (2005) argues that “advertising to children is then a kind of immoral war on childhood” (p. 86) and “when advertizing is conducted in schools, the immorality is compounded because the power of the state is twisted to the service of special interest...and the orientation of the school is shifted toward miseducative experience” (p. 86). However, Molar simply assumes that commercial practices within schools undermine the democratic function of education. Yet, as explained above, not all consumerism practices are bad for democracy or for flourishing; nor are all commercial practices an ‘immoral war on childhood’.

The main issue is how commercial practices enter into schools without democratic legitimacy. Thus, the democratic principle avoids these hasty judgments and overgeneralizations by pinpointing the ways in which the commercialization of education—fast food cafeterias, corporate schooling, commercial advertisement, etc.—occurs because companies have the ability to circumvent the democratic process; thus, they are able to commodify education without the proper democratic legitimation. In this sense, the democratic principle rests upon a conception of democratic legitimacy, which in short, is achieved when institutions are structured by public reason and embody the norms and practices needed to sustain human flourishing (Shapiro, 1999, pp. 64–110). Thus, commercial practices should be allowed in schools, based upon this principle, only after individuals are able to democratically deliberate upon the practices they want in schools.

The Flourishing Principle

While the democratic principle establishes the procedural conditions that must be met for companies to enter into the educational context, the flourishing principle justifies regulating commercialism based on its effects upon a child’s well-being (See Brighouse, 2005b). The impetus behind this principle is: All democratic decisions concerning educational matters should be made with the intent of promoting the long-term best interest of the child’s ability to flourish (Ertman & Williams, 2005; Nussbaum, 1992, 2000; Sen, 2000). The extent to which the well-being criterion can be applied is quite broad and should be analyzed on a case-by-case basis. However, the general idea is that democratic bodies should regulate all commercial practices that

prevent children from developing properly and fully, which includes the capability to practically reason and critique consumer capitalism (Schinkel, de Ruyter, & Steutel, 2010).

Determining when certain consumer practices are detrimental to a child's well-being requires a great deal of empirical evidence, which cannot be provided here. Nonetheless, this principle avoids the paradox of consumerism by establishing a threshold for determining when consumer practices are harmful to the child's development. Of course, the deliberative process should be the means by which this threshold is established, thus this principle folds into the democratic principle. Yet and still, critical pedagogues can critique the commercial practices occurring within education based upon the likelihood that said practices fall below a reasonably developed threshold (See Satz, 2010). For example, unhealthy foods—like sodas, candies, and fast food—have a detrimental effect upon a child's well-being because they contribute to health problems, like child obesity (Brownell & Horgen, 2004). Therefore, a strong case can be made explaining why these consumer items are outside of any reasonable threshold that protects the child's ability to flourish.

The Transformative Principle

The backbone of critical pedagogy is *the transformative principle*, however given our current neoliberal climate it is also hardest principle to apply. The idea behind this principle is that a democratic education should aim to provide children with the ability to create a more just and democratic society; and thus all social practices occurring within schools should align with the values of a deep socialist democracy (Dewey, 1963). In theory, this principle would allow democratic bodies to limit access to any business, which fails to advance human flourishing within the larger society (e.g. companies failing to democratically structure their work environment, advocate for the redistribution of wealth, or for other policies that deepen democracy). Therefore, this principle would be quite expansive covering the curriculum content, the education ethos, and policy decisions.

I realize this principle is somewhat vague, and deliberately so; with socialism off the current political agenda I acknowledge the difficulty in conceptualizing an education that could be organized to advance social transformation. Thus, I do not really have anything new to say about social transformation or how to practically apply this principle. However, let me clarify some tensions critical pedagogues need to address when thinking through this principle. First of all, a theory of social transformation should focus the issues of *achievability*. By *achievability* I mean identifying particular cracks and contradictions within particular social arrangements and filling these spaces with progressive causes aimed at challenging consumer capitalism (Wright, 2010). Stated differently, achievability requires strategically implementing non-reformist reforms aimed at opening spaces that challenge consumer capitalism—even if these are small. Here it might be useful to think about achievability in two different respects: first, how to reshape the educational context in desirable and justifiable ways that prohibit certain consumer practices from entering schools (Apple, 2000; Brighouse, 2005a). Second, how to link students and communities with social movements aimed at challenging consumer capitalism (Sandlin, 2010).

When dealing with the educational context the aim is to regulate the ways consumer capitalism enters the education context, while also trying to inform children about the commercial processes that are illegitimately entering into school. In addition, schools should try to ensure that companies who enter the educational ethos do so under conditions that are open to, or at least do not prevent, teachers from critically addressing the larger questions around

justice and capitalism. In addition, by schools I mean the combination of parents, community members, teachers and administrators who must deliberate upon the way in which schools will be used as a means of social transformation (Strike, 1993). Furthermore, teachers should try to provide children with the critical literacy necessary for critiquing the business practices of companies entering into schools (See Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; Morrell, 2007). Finally, schools should find ways to justifiably and feasibly use the institutional power of education to advance justice. For instance, anti-sweatshop movements have pressured universities to buy their garments from companies not using exploited labor. In addition, colleges and universities have implemented policies preventing companies for recruiting on campus if they violate equal employment practices. Although these examples deal with higher education, and are small in scale, they do show ways in which the collective power of movements can place pressure on educational institutions to sanction larger companies for their failure to advance human flourishing.

Obviously, schools will find it difficult to implement the above standards because of our current political climate. Beyond this, however, critical pedagogues must find ways to collectively organize and challenge consumer capitalism, and one way to do so is by connecting students and parents to larger social movements (Anderson, 2009). As many scholars have argued, social movements are the most effective mechanism for creating social change, thus it is essential that any critical pedagogy against consumerism seriously link educational practices with movements which are attempting to contest the commercialization of education and childhood (Alexander, 2008; Anyon, 2005; Cohen & Arato, 1994). For example, within the United States, movements such as the Citizen's Campaign for Commercial-Free schools, Campaign for a Commercial Free-Childhood, and Alliance for Childhood seek to prevent the commercialization of childhood and other social contexts that may be harmful to a child's development (Schor, 2005, p. 225). In addition, many of these movements have an educational component, which can be brought into classrooms, communities, and used to increase consumer awareness amongst parents, students, and community members (Harrison, Newholm, & Shaw, 2005; Hilton, 2008; Pugh, 2009). While these recommendations cannot guarantee the type of radical social transformations that would bring about a deep socialist democracy, they are essential steps to think about when addressing the issues of social transformation.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that a critical pedagogy against consumerism must be grounded in normative theory, and without said theoretical tools, critical pedagogy is unable to accurately and judiciously criticize consumer capitalism. A failure to engage normative theory is problematic within critical pedagogy at large, but is particularly evident within the book *Critical Pedagogies of Consumerism*, which remained trapped in the paradox of consumerism and was unable to normatively pinpoint the harms caused by consumer capitalism.

As I have argued, by developing a normative conception of a deep socialist democracy, based upon the value of human flourishing, we can avoid the problematic opposition between Marxism and post-modernism by acknowledging that the agency gained within capitalism is actually part of the logic of capitalism itself. Thus, rather than focusing simply on agency vs. structure this normative framework allows us to address the structural arrangements needed to provide individuals with a real and effective opportunity to democratically control their social environment, which includes controlling which commercial activities can enter into schools.

Moreover, this framework allows us to identify the negative effects capitalism has on human flourishing and democracy.

We can identify consumer capitalism's negative effects on education by analyzing the mechanisms that undermine one or more of the three proposed principles—the *democratic principle*, the *flourishing principle*, and the *transformative principle*. While these principles might not exhaust the normative standards through which critical pedagogues can condemn the commercialization of education, without some normative framework such a critique of consumerism will likely remain stuck within the paradox of consumerism, and unable to push forward a democratically justifiable agenda to challenge the commercialization of education.

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