

HUMANUM, Fall 2011, THE CHILD

David Buckingham and Vebjørng Tingstad (eds), *Childhood and Consumer Culture*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

Reviewed by Colleen Rouleau

Consumerism, particularly in the West, is as ubiquitous as the air we breathe. There is no escaping constant advertising, whether in flyers delivered at the doorstep, brand-names stamped on shirts and shoes, telemarketers interrupting dinner, web pop-ups, and even advertising spaces in parish Sunday bulletins. We are immersed in a world of manufactured goods to be desired and purchased. Given the outrageous success of marketing strategies, it is doubtful that even mature adults are capable of resisting this endless stream of manipulated information. Yet how often do we consider the impact of consumerism on the child?

Childhood and Consumer Culture is a collection of fifteen articles spanning the work of almost twenty researchers from the USA, Canada, the UK, Norway, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and Israel. The editors, David Buckingham and Vebjørng Tingstad, attempt to situate childhood and familial consumerist practices in a broader social and historical context. Typically, books on this subject are characterized by polarization – some arguing for the protection of the child’s innocence from market influences, others celebrating the child’s agency as a savvy individual who shapes identity through goods acquired. According to the editors, titles such as *No Logo* (2001), *Born to Buy* (2004), *Consumer Kids* (2009), *Toxic Childhood* (2006), *Kidfluence* (2003), or *Brandchild* (2003) fall into one of these two camps. The authors of this collection bring a more nuanced presentation forward, realizing that the truth lies somewhere between the narratives of children as either powerful agents or passive victims of consumerism.

The articles are grouped into five parts. Of special note in Part I, “History of Children’s Consumption,” is “Valves of Adult Desire: The Regulation and Incitement of Children’s Consumption.” Author Gary Cross provides a fascinating trajectory of the rise of consumer culture in post-war America. He examines the interplay between adult desire and parental capacity to provide amusement and satisfaction to one’s children via purchasing power. “By giving to children, parents restored their own long-lost pleasure in things. Increasingly, adults identified wonder with the child-like (rather than say the cultivated religious or aesthetic experience)” (p. 24).

Cross contextualizes common things such as the teddy bear, the disposable camera, and the comic strip in the realm of this emerging consumer culture. He rightly concludes that concerned parents cannot be satisfied with a merely moralistic regulation of marketing practices, but ultimately must ask how their own desires “shape the desires of the young” (p. 29).

The third article, by Jacob Smith (“The Books That Sing: The Marketing of Children’s Phonograph Records, 1890-1930”), is a window into the pre-Disney world of marketing, in which mothers were the target audience of advertising. It examines the confluence of technology in the home – mothers busy with new household machines (washers, vacuums, etc.), and children entertained simultaneously by new devices (the phonograph). The “books that sing” were promoted under the guise of being educative.

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Consider this magazine ad from 1920: “When your grandmother was a child, she loved those songs, and she, in turn, rocked your mother’s wooden cradle gently to the same quaint, old nursery rhymes. And your mother loved them and sang them, just as you love them. Only you don’t have to sing them to your children. They can listen to them to their hearts’ content as they are sung by the BUBBLE BOOKS” (p. 54). Smith then traces the transfer from marketing to mothers to direct advertising to children, and explains how Disney was able to connect animated characters to experiences of shopping through licensing agreements with department stores.

Part II focuses on theory and method in this research. Daniel Thomas Cook, in “Commercial Enculturation: Moving Beyond Consumer Socialization,” makes a convincing argument for broadening our understanding of consumption. His concern is that too often our structured understanding of the consumer is based on a progressive notion of personal development, i.e. moving from unknowing child to mature, responsible adult. In this model, which he describes as “consumer socialization,” only the adult (with money to spend) can be a fully fledged “consumer.”

Cook is rather proposing a “commercial enculturation model” as “a means to capture and emphasize the variety of ways in which children come to ‘know’ and participate in commercial life” (p. 70). Limiting consumption to an actual purchase does not take into account the pervasiveness of consumption in our lives. Knowing, desiring, touching, and viewing goods are all part of consumption. For instance, branding is based as much upon “making a connection between a person and a symbol” (p. 72), as it is on actually owning the particular item.

The most radical article in the collection is that by Barbro Johansson, “Subjectivities of the Child Consumer: Beings and Becomings.” She notes that research is shifting away from the person as “autonomous agent” to “dependent on ‘extensions’ in the shape of other humans, as well as on artefacts, technology and texts (Lee 2001; Latour 1996)” (p. 81). Rather than seeking a more robust concept of person as being-in-relation, Johansson further reduces an already reductive view of the person as autonomous individual to simply a string of “becomings.”

“Not only do the distinctions between being and becoming fade away,” she concludes, “*so too does the teleological interpretation of reality* [emphasis mine]” (p. 91). This does not seem to trouble her in any way. In fact, she simply asks, what if childhood does not exist? Doing away with all distinctions and categories seems the only acceptable way forward, because in naming things we are continually putting up limits – and this, according to Johansson, is to be avoided at all costs. She prefers to speak of an “ontology of flow.” The question must be put to Johansson, how one can even speak of “ontology” without things, being, and *telos*?

In sharp contrast, the article by Claudia Mitchell that follows seems a refreshing defence of “things,” opening with this citation: “Imagine a world without things. It would be not so much an empty world as a blurry, frictionless one: no sharp outlines would separate one part of the uniform plenum from another; there would be no resistance against which to stub a toe or test a theory or struggle stalwartly. Nor would there be anything to describe, or to explain, remark on, interpret, or

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complain about – just a kind of porridgy oneness. Without things, we would stop talking (Daston, 2004:9)” (p. 94). This seems the logical outcome of Johansson’s position. An “ontology of flow” is the obliteration of the “thing,” even of thought and language, as Daston indicates. Mitchell argues that it is precisely “the thing” that allows us entry into the study of the world. She then contemplates the function of childhood objects in memory. [For further reading on the “thing” I recommend Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Recovery of Wonder: The New Freedom and the Asceticism of Power* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005).]

Part III, “Practices of Contemporary Marketers,” includes a fascinating essay on children’s virtual worlds by Janet Wasko. In 2009 there were over 200 youth-oriented virtual worlds, which today attract an estimated 20 million young people. Wasko’s research focuses on the “immersive advertising” of many of these sites, particularly Neopets and Webkinz. Industry leaders view these ventures as an enormous marketing extravaganza. Courtney Lane, Director of Mattel Girls Online, stated, “It becomes addictive... It has tremendous stickiness, and that helps us gain the exposure we need” (p. 119). On Neopets, children can shop, play the Neopia stock market, and even gamble on virtual slot machines. The author’s primary critique concerns the sites’ promotion of capitalism and consumerism, although she does not question how technology itself is shaped by consumerism. Secondarily she notes the deceptive nature of the sites’ claim to foster unlimited creativity, when in fact the child is only clicking a mouse, “choosing” someone else’s pre-programmed ideas. Wasko’s criticisms do not go far enough. A more serious critique of technology itself is needed to fully appreciate the problematic nature of virtual worlds for children.

Parts IV and V, “Social Contexts of Children’s Consumption” and “Childhood Identities and Consumption” respectively, include several articles exploring children’s perception of brands, clothing, and their desire for and/or lack of consumer goods. The most noteworthy article is “The Stuff at Mom’s House and the Stuff at Dad’s House: The Material Consumption of Divorce for Adolescents,” by Caitlyn Collins and Michelle Janning. Just as all household objects from the marriage, formerly signs of unity, are translated by divorce into signs of disunity, so the children themselves risk becoming objectified in the process. There is no attempt made by the authors to present this as something normal or easy for the children. In fact, statements from the children interviewed indicate how painful the experience of divorce can be.

The authors of these essays raise challenging questions about childhood and consumer culture, going beyond a simple analysis of marketing techniques and satisfaction surveys. This is laudable. Their research is critical and reflective, and is often keenly insightful. However, the almost exclusive reliance on social science is somewhat limiting. The explication of gender and even childhood as *constructs* undercuts their ability to make a final judgment on these matters. Without an understanding of the person’s dignity, religious needs, and ultimate desires, it is impossible to decide whether or not particular consuming practices are detrimental or beneficial for children – or even to rightly grasp the essence of childhood and “things” in themselves.

Despite this lack, reading the essays is informative, and the topics covered are sure to raise awareness in the reader. Parents and educators will find the articles a springboard for further reflection on these issues. Anecdotally, over the course of reading the book I began to notice how often my children spoke of “buying” as a “solution” to a problem – whether it was a food item we

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were out of, or wanting a second identical toy so they would “not have to fight” over the one we already own. Noting their vocabulary (need to buy, need to get) and perceptions concerning family consumption – that a lack is naturally solved through a purchase – was, at times, unsettling.

Posing questions about one’s own children and the items one provides for them is a critical and necessary part of parenting, one that requires perhaps more reflection than is often given. How does one foster solutions other than consumerist ones? Instead of buying, how can making, imagining, creating, sharing, even going without, be encouraged? As I finished the book, I was both amused and perturbed to realize that my bookmark was an old receipt.

Colleen Rouleau is a graduate of the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family. She lives in Edmonton with her husband and three young children.