Consumerism and the flourishing life in a climate emergency

Some implications for schools

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Abstract

The contribution of 'consumerism' to environmental degradation has been widely acknowledged. An anti-consumerist perspective appeals because it draws attention to the ideological underpinnings of people's attitudes and day-to-day behaviour, but the tone of the debate often leads to polarisation rather than a productive engagement in dialogue. To persuade people to re-examine their values and beliefs requires a more nuanced approach, where the various bêtes noires identified by anti-consumerist rhetoric are subject to greater scrutiny. In this article I critically examine some of the key concepts of the anti-consumerist position and suggest a better starting point for discussion in a school context would be one which emphasised the significance of pleasure-seeking in the social life of students, and the part played in this by 'consumption'. Some implications for schools are discussed, in particular the space allowed for 'free' association of students as an important aspect of the flourishing life in school in the here and now. I note the dangers of adopting a disapproving approach to informal and popular culture, and the possible link between this and resistance to the environmental message by disadvantaged groups.

Introduction

The development of students as active citizens is an essential part of the citizenship curriculum. It would include the encouragement of age-appropriate involvement in democratic politics at local, national and international level, as well as various forms of community action in relation to the environment. But it is one thing for students to become actively involved in these issues and quite another for them to do so at the expense of their general development as young people. As Shannon Jackson (Gibbons et al., 2020)) points out in a previous edition of *FORUM*, students as citizens have duties but they also have rights – 'to be young people and enjoy being in school and socialising' (Gibbons et al., 2020, p289).

This is an important point. Nobody wants to see students being so involved with the politics of the environment that there is little time or energy left over for anything

else or in extreme cases being made to feel guilty about enjoying themselves at all. Schools should certainly foster a commitment to the common good as citizens in a democratic society, but this should go hand in hand with education for an autonomous and flourishing life both in the here and now and in the future.

All aspects of the curriculum are important, the informal as well as the formal, but in view of Shannon's remarks, I want to highlight the role of the school in providing space for the development of pleasurable, respectful and mutual rewarding group activity. Teachers obviously have a contribution to make, but what I have in mind are social relationships generated by the students themselves as an expression of their growing independence.

However, there is a tension here for teachers between 'a hands-off' approach and the need for some form of intervention, especially when bullying, racism or other intimidatory behaviours are involved. Informal social processes are complex, and in any one school there will be a vast array of different attitudes and behaviours amongst individuals and groups, and a variety of pressures stemming from different social and cultural influences, some more dubious from an educational point of view than others. Peer pressure is often regarded as problematical because it seems to suggest that students are being forced to do things against their will, but social influence is intrinsic to group life and an inevitable part of being a member of any group.

In relation to environmental issues, there are many aspects which teachers may regard as problematical. Students bring to school all kinds of desires, needs and values derived from the prevailing culture of consumerism in society at large that has worked its way into their everyday lives and relationships. Consumerist values are often seen by environmental activists as a big part of the problem, but clearly a negation of them would be potentially disruptive of student enjoyment of their social life. So we need to be clear about what we mean by consumerism and why it might be harmful.

What is consumerism?

We all have to consume to survive, and in our society that means paying for goods, and thus being a consumer. Most of us 'consume' therefore for much of the day, whether at school or at home, at work or on holiday, shopping or just sitting in a chair in a warm room, writing reports on a computer or playing computer games, and so on. Many of us do these things without feeling we are being overindulgent or extravagant as we go about are daily business.

Clearly, we need to think carefully about why, what and how much we consume, but from the point of view of those who regard consumerism per se as the problem we are unlikely to get very far without addressing some major ideological issues. For the anti-consumerist there is no easy answer because consumerism is deeply rooted in the social, cultural and economic fabric of our society, thus in our self-definitions

and social identities, what we desire and what we think we need. They frequently make a distinction between authentic needs and the 'artificial' or 'false' wants created by a consumerist society. We see this kind of thinking in some of the literature on the Green New Deal. Pettifor (2019) envisages a society that gives 'more priority to human needs over human wants and preferences', thus a society which caters for limited needs as opposed to limitless wants (Pettifor, 2019, pp95-96).   .

These 'false' wants stem not from 'natural' desires but are created by the powers that be to serve corporate interests. As Norris (2020) acknowledges, it suits big business for youth to be 'deeply immersed in the world of advertising images and commercial logos' (Norris, 2020, p875), which is intimately linked to competitive striving for status and social recognition in the social group. To acquire a particular 'good' is to acquire status. What might at first seem to be an expression of choice and freedom is in fact a reflection of desires and interests rooted in consumer identities that have been deliberately constructed by methods of advertising that are often more influential than schools or teachers.

In advanced industrial societies, environmental problems are thus seen as in part a function of a rampant consumerism, with those who have the largest share of the cake doing the most damage to the environment. Not only is consumerism bad for society but it doesn't even improve the wellbeing of the most affluent individuals once a certain point has been reached. The pollution caused by too many cars affects everyone, not just the better off.

It's not as if these problems have a long history. They are relatively new phenomena linked to modernisation, industrialisation and technological development under capitalism, giving rise to a society where one's identity as a consumer is more important than one's identity as a citizen. People are encouraged to be more individualistic, more concerned with their own self-interests and personal gratification than the public good. Consumerism does establish bonds between people based on common interests in brands, but although such activity helps to create communities of a kind, the ties are weaker and less meaningful than those of the citizen. For Norris 'political energies are drained or redirected from more radical and effective steps towards more mundane and palatable approaches that don't challenge or threaten our consumer sensibilities' (Norris, 2020, p880). We become less adept at the reflective thought required for participation in democratic politics because of the constant demands on our attention by a corporate-dominated media.

Critique of anti-consumerism

An anti-consumerist perspective appeals because it directs attention to the ideological underpinnings of people's attitudes towards 'getting and spending' in their day-to-day lives. The focus on social and cultural structures enables a better understanding of the

scale of the problem and the need for radical society-wide solutions. But I feel there is a tendency for such critiques to overstate their case. The tone often generates more heat than light, leading to polarisation and sniping from entrenched positions rather than productive engagement in dialogue. It is not self-evident to many people, including school students, that their habits of consumption are as coerced and damaging as anti-consumerists allege. To persuade others to re-examine their values and beliefs requires a more nuanced approach, where the various bêtes noires identified by anti-consumerist rhetoric are subject to greater scrutiny.

Let's take the idea of 'endless' or 'false' wants. Most anti-consumerists draw a distinction between 'basic' or 'biological' needs and other needs, which for them are not really needs at all but more accurately described as 'wants' or 'preferences' and in a consumer society are often 'artificial' or 'false'. But this distinction between needs and wants is specious. We can all – including the individual concerned – agree that a person doesn't need a second yacht even if they want one. But if I'm hungry and want more porridge then my want here clearly derives from a basic need. Likewise, a person may feel they need to go to a party because they feel they want company. When we do use the distinction in everyday speech it is often to draw attention to the fact that we feel a person has got it wrong. They may feel a need to take a course of action which they express as a want whereas we feel that though they may want it, they don't really need it.

But who are we to make such judgements? In this case it is the anti-consumerist who decides, reading off from their own ideological position whether a want based on a need is 'genuine' or 'false'. So the distinction here is not so much between 'need' and 'want' as between those 'wants' or 'needs' that are deemed to be authentic and therefore legitimate and those that aren't. The use of terms like 'basic' or 'biological' need is an attempt to buttress the argument by grounding the distinction in a putative 'scientific' understanding of human survival needs, as if these could be identified in an uncontroversial, culture-free way. Clearly, there are certain physiological needs which are universal, but a description of any particular human society in these terms is always reductive because it fails to acknowledge the socially and culturally relative nature of terms like 'survival'.

Anti-consumerists would be on stronger ground if they accepted that many of these perceived 'needs' and 'wants' are relative to and reflect the values of the dominant consumer society. In this respect they are authentic, even though we may regard them as dysfunctional for sustainable development. But there is nothing 'unnatural' about them. Material objects will always have a symbolic role to play in the social construction of identities, and in our society it is likely that branded goods will be employed in this way, contributing to the expression and enactment of individual and group status. Students, however, are not completely powerless and without agency in this situation. How these brands enter student discourse and practice is a matter for investigation.

Judging from what we know about student cultural practices, the situation is likely to be more complex than teachers and other adults imagine (see Quicke, 2019).

In much of the anti-consumerist rhetoric there is also a strong sense of an anti-modernism and anti-industrialism, which as Varul points out 'seeks salvation in the rejection of technology and consumption and whose utopia tends to be a world of de-technologized frugal communities' (Varul, 2013, p298). A retrospective communitarianism is invoked, harking back to the time of an alleged authentic community, a view historically associated with both the political right and left. The philosopher Heidegger, a supporter of fascism, regarded the big city of modern societies and the consumerism that went with it as part of the demise of traditional religious and status hierarchies, the 'uprooting, estrangement, alienation from folk, soil and destiny' (ibid., p299).

But it could be argued that it was precisely this 'uprooting' that enabled the possibility under capitalism for the development of human potential by providing more opportunities for self-expression and reinvention of the self. The dynamic of constant change – 'all that is solid melts into air' (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848) – prevented a reversion to a self-constricting communalism and parochialism, whilst the anonymity of a consumerist city allowed space and freedom for the enhancement of diversity and difference.

It is important to make clear that I'm not saying the criticisms of consumerism are wrong or that these broader issues should not be discussed with students. Although capitalism did much to unlock human potential, it also held it back. Many citizens could not fully realise the promise of freedom because they did not have the purchasing power to enable them to have the means to live 'freely'. The main problem was not too much consumption but too little and this is still true today for many peoples of the world, who do not experience the problems of affluence. My point is that it is not individualism per se which is the main problem. It does not necessarily have negative consequence for democracy and the environment. It is not always about selfishness, personal gratification and making choices in a way that is incompatible with being a good citizen. I'm not denying that people can act selfishly, but this is not an inevitable outcome even in a society which puts a high value on individual freedom and consumer choice.

So what I am suggesting is a different starting point from one that regards individual pleasure seeking as what Varul describes as 'a capitalist induced moral wrong' (op. cit., p307). The value of pleasure-seeking for wellbeing should be acknowledged and celebrated. Of course, some of this behaviour and choice-making in accordance with existing desires will be problematical from an environmental viewpoint, but we should not begin the discussion with moral condemnation or talk of self-sacrifice or the dangers of certain behaviours, but rather with the pleasures of consuming and how we might

possibly do this differently, what Kate Soper (2007) describes as 'alternative hedonism'.

Implications for schools

It's no accident that Shannon Jackson uses the words 'young', 'enjoyment' and 'socialising' in the same sentence because this seems to encapsulate some of the essential features of being an adolescent. Being 'young' means one is still coming to terms with new and fluctuating desires, feelings and bodily changes. 'Enjoyment' is typically what pleasure-seeking adolescents strive for. They value teachers who like to 'have a laugh' and they like to associate with friends who are 'fun'. This is not to say that they are superficial and lack seriousness, but 'pleasure' is a high priority and an important aspect of the flourishing life. 'Socialising' can have its downside, but for most young people it is usually exciting and energising, a source of support and solidarity involving a new kind of physical intimacy and desire to experiment as one gets older.

Schools where teaching about democracy is a high priority should allow students space to take initiatives without reference to adults as they begin find their own feet in the social world, even if this does on occasion mean certain individuals and groups kicking over the traces in undesirable ways. Of course it is important for teachers to take action against antisocial behaviour, but this should take place against a general background of permissiveness. Support for student activism flows as much if not more from this as it does from formal citizenship education.

Free association means being able to enjoy yourself in your own way. Students, like people generally, are sometimes aware and sometimes not aware of the environmental impact of their activities. For many the devil at present may have all the best tunes, and identifying a substitute which is just as enjoyable is not easy. Take video games for instance. During the pandemic lockdown such games were considered a good way to pass the time safely and also socially in relating to your friends online. But as Dan Golding has pointed out (*The Guardian*, 5 October 2020), some of the more popular stay-at-home games, like Microsoft Flight Simulator, involve heavy carbon emissions in their manufacture, packaging and console energy consumption. Historically, some of the bestselling games have been the most polluting. The mobile phone is another example of a product that has a potentially life-enhancing social effect but has to be examined critically with regard to its environmental impact. These are widely acknowledged issues, often dealt with in discussions on recycling, but what will be the next shiny product that captures the imagination and how will we assess its impact on the environment? How much of this innovation is driven by consumerism as opposed to 'normal' consumption? What should be the school's attitude to the popular and commercial elements which feed into student perceptions and social activities?

There are no easy answers, but there are approaches to these questions of which

schools should be wary. Teachers have often seen popular culture as inferior, unworthy, shallow and superficial, reflecting the corrupting influence of commercialism; and thus as a vehicle for reinforcing attitudes the very opposite of those the school is trying to encourage. Collini draws attention to 'the residues of a 19th century secularised Protestantism' which at its core makes a contrast between 'on the one side, self control and social purpose and on the other passivity, indulgence and selfishness' (Collini, 2019, p147). This moral condemnation has a long history, going back to a view held by certain members of both the political right and the left about the destructive power of mass culture in modern society, a position often accompanied by negative characterisations of the working class. Even a liberal leftist like Richard Hoggart made statements which, if voiced by any teachers today, would be considered at best inappropriate and at worst highly discriminatory and prejudicial. Collini quotes passages from *The Uses of Literacy* which include references to the masses encouraged by affluence resulting in a 'soft-mass hedonism' and 'a largely material outlook' with the working class being particularly vulnerable with their 'passive visual taking on of bad mass art geared to a low mental age ... immature emotional satisfactions ... technology and prosperity combining to weaken their moral fibre' (quoted in Collini, 2019, pp147-8).

Teachers should avoid any hint of this in the way they address concerns about the undesirable aspects of popular culture. Many students manage to accommodate these interests without undermining educational values, but for others, in particular those who either reject or are ambivalent about the official culture of the school, pop culture and the commercial aspects that go with it will have a greater significance for self and group definition. Not only will teachers be seen as killjoys, but precisely because they do so in the name of the formal culture of the school are likely to encourage an even deeper commitment to an oppositional culture of allegiance to consumerist values.

Out and out anti-school groups are usually in the minority, but it's quite possible for even those who conform behaviourally to be indifferent to environmental issues because they associate them with a school regime which has less significance for their group life than popular culture. You could well have a situation where certain kinds of anti-school activism represent a climate change-denying conservatism; rebellion and resistance not on the side of environmental activists but on the opposite side, taking the form of 'mucking about' and being disruptive rather than verbal argument and strike action. I don't think it is fanciful to suggest that this micro-politics of school life may have contributed to politics at national level, and the resistance to social liberalism and environmental concerns by communities left behind in the post-industrial society. Varul refers to a 'vanguard movement', whether of left or right, composed of an 'enlightened few trying to wean the intoxicated masses off their addiction to consumption' (Varul, 2013

p297). My impression is that student activists don't fall into this trap when confronted with the intransigence, indifference and even hostility of those who are less advantaged than themselves. But the danger is there.

Concluding comment

In this article I have stressed the importance of 'enjoyment' as an aspect of the flourishing life in schools. In the present context, students' social and emotional needs are often addressed under the heading of mental health and wellbeing, on the assumption that the main concern is student stress and strategies for dealing with psychological states like eco-anxiety. Carmichael (2020) identifies some useful approaches from the way content on climate change is delivered to the usual forms of relieving stress, like a healthy diet and exercise.

There is certainly a place for this, but what I am suggesting is that as a matter of course, and irrespective of whether there is a climate emergency, all students should still be encouraged to enjoy life in ways young people normally do in our society, and not feel guilty about doing so. If this involves activities which from an adult point of view may seem frivolous or superficial then so be it.

Rather than a language of sacrifice we should, to quote Jessica Hellmann (2019), try to align 'the pursuit of the good life with sustainable life habits' and 'until we overcome this challenge sustainable technologies will not be taken up, environmental policies will not be enacted and the real environmental problems will be ignored until it's simply too late to do something about them'.

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