

The Commodification of Adult Education (Research Completed)

Perhaps one of the most dramatic developments that has taken place over the past two decades in Western societies has been the rapid growth of cultural production. The assault of late-capitalism on the few remaining shards of traditional society has opened up a yawning cultural void which the industries of cultural production are rushing to fill. To an unprecedented extent, culture is being commodified and is being bought and sold in the marketplace. It is so lucrative that some of the largest corporations in the world have adopted the production of culture as their main preoccupation. Education has not been exempt from this process. Very rapidly, knowledge has been transformed from a stock of interpretations, narratives, and explanations carried within cultural traditions and passed down in a process of socialization and enculturation, to a commodity to be industrially produced and exchanged for money. The proposed paper explores the implications of the process of cultural commodification for the contemporary practice of adult education.

Drawing together important strands of research from the traditions of critical theory (Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas), postmodernism (Jameson, and Harvey), and cultural studies (Jhally), the paper begins by tracing the history of the subsumption of culture within the capitalist mode of production. The paper relates how, while capitalists have always invested in the production of culture, they have usually done so to maintain the social conditions most conducive to the growth of capitalism. The difference now is that culture is being invested in for the very different reason of making money. The paper asserts that this change has dramatic implications for adult education. Perhaps the most obvious of these is that adult education is rapidly becoming a very profitable, thus quickly growing, field of practice. While many advocates of adult education gloat over the new capacities of adult education to sustain itself, the paper warns that the commodification of adult education has other implications that are not so positive. For one thing, the process of commodification is resulting in an intensification of adult education that is onerous for both students and practitioners. The paper refers to the work of Michael Apple as providing an exemplary account of this process of intensification. A more pernicious implication of the commodification is that it undermines the capacity of adult education to continue its historical function as an emancipatory force in contemporary society. The paper is careful to clarify the dangers of this development. Once it has proceeded too far down the path towards commodification, adult education may no longer possess the resources to resist its seamless incorporation into the logic of the market.

All adult educators, whether ESL teachers in community colleges, trainers for major industrial corporations, self-employed HRD consultants, graduate students working in prison education, or university professors, are subject to the intensification of producing adult education in today's society. The paper discusses ways that adult educators can lessen the effects of intensification and ensure that adult education retains its emancipatory potential.

The Commodification of Adult Education

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Abstract: This paper discusses the consequences of cultural commodification for emancipatory adult education, arguing that while cultural commodification may generate a greater demand for adult education such market-driven programming will be stripped of any emancipatory potential.

Introduction

We have entered an age that is marked by a crisis of power, patriarchy, authority, identity, and ethics. This new age has been described, for better or worse, by many theorists in a variety of disciplines as the age of postmodernism. (Giroux, 1992, p. 39).

One of the most dramatic developments taking place in what Giroux (1992) describes as "the age of postmodernism" is the commodification of culture. To an unprecedented degree, cultural artifacts, such as, works of art, knowledge, health and fitness, romance, and travel are being bought and sold in the marketplace. The production of culture has become so lucrative that some of the world's largest corporations have adopted it as their main preoccupation. Transnational corporations now generate significant profits through their control of such cultural institutions as television networks, newspaper chains, film studios, and publishing houses.¹ The commodification of culture is now such that many musicians, entertainers, and athletes have developed corporate identities that rival or surpass their cultural ones.²

Cultural commodification, however, is not restricted to the realms of art and entertainment, even the once hallowed space of education and the sacrosanct sphere of knowledge is being commodified. Once a stock of interpretations, narratives, and explanations carried within cultural traditions that were passed down through a process of socialization and enculturation, knowledge is rapidly being transformed into a commodity that can be quickly produced and rapidly exchanged on the open market. This paper contends that while this process may well create a greater demand for adult education programs, such market-driven programs will be stripped of any emancipatory potential.

The Cultural Practices of Adult Education

If we interpret the term "culture" in the broad, anthropological sense of Raymond Williams (1958), that is, as "a whole way of life," a way of life "which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary language" (Williams, cited in Hebdige, 1976, p. 6), then it becomes apparent that adult education has always been a cultural practice. As a social activity that aims to foster learning, adult education emerges out of and draws upon the symbolic realm of culture. Within such cultural realms, social realities are constructed, realities that allow the members of a particular culture to make sense of and share their lived experiences. Adult education draws upon such world views to communicate ideas and coordinate action. As such, adult education is a *rational* cultural practice: it offers justifications and reasons that "make sense" to support what it prescribes. But just as reasons can be offered in favour of

¹For an interesting account of corporate ownership of television networks, see Douglas Kellner's, *Television and the Crisis of Democracy* (1990). Sut Jhally provides an interesting account of the involvement of corporations in daily newspapers and the film industry in *The Political Economy of Culture* (1989). Michael Apple discusses the involvement of major corporations in the publishing industry in *Teachers and Texts* (1986).

²Consider, for instance, the multi-million dollar contracts of rock stars like Madonna, TV personalities like Bill Cosby, or athletes like Herbie Puckett.

a particular course of action, so too can reasons be offered against a course of action. Consequently, adult education holds the potential to help adults formulate rational arguments cultural norms that are oppressing them.

The Formal Subsumption of Culture

Not all cultures have need of adult education programs, however. Traditional or pre-modern cultures, for example, did not require adults to be further educated because the processes of socialization and enculturation fully prepared the young for the roles they would undertake in that “way of life.” The stable and unquestioned cache of meanings, norms, roles, explanations, and institutions that comprised traditional culture provided the means for social reproduction, including the production and distribution of wealth, the maintenance of social solidarity, and the legitimation of social relations. Such cultures did not require cultural practices to supplement those of socialization and enculturation. Consequently, adult education did not flourish in such contexts. With the advent of modernity, however, pre-modern forms of association were dramatically transformed. Marx, who held that “capitalism *is* modernity and modernity capitalism” (Sayer, 1991, p. 12) offers a sobering account of this transformation:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air. (Marx, 1848, in Kamenka, 1983, p. 207).

Following in Marx’s footsteps, Jürgen Habermas (1975, 1984, 1987) offers an insightful analysis of this change. He contends that while social actions in traditional societies are governed by the prescriptions of culture, in modernity certain realms of social action, most notably those contributing to the production of wealth and the distribution of power, split away from the larger cultural context to form semi-autonomous realms of action coordination. Modern society, he argues, is thus comprised of two interacting yet “uncoupled” social realms: the *lifeworld*, a realm where action continues to be coordinated by cultural and communicative means; and the *system*, a realm where action is coordinated by forms of ratiocination that develop around the need to accumulate money and power. Neither of these realms, however, can exist independently of the other. On the one hand, the lifeworld requires the productive capacities and the administrative accomplishments of the system to provide for its material and organizational needs; on the other, the system relies on the capacities of the lifeworld to provide labour power, consumers, taxes, and mass loyalty. None of the latter, however, exist in the abstract; they are integrated elements of the lifeworld’s culture. Consequently, the system, in order to ensure its continued existence, is forced to justify its needs. It must do this by offering justifications that “make sense”—rational arguments—to the members of the lifeworld.

Marx was the first social theorist to realize that the capitalist system does not employ abstract labour power but complete human beings who are born and raised within a cultural context, and that labour power, a fundamental and inseparable part of every human being, was abstracted in the capitalist labour process and transformed into a commodity to be sold on the marketplace.³ Marx’s primary concern, however, was to reveal how the commodification of labour was, in itself, sufficient to mystify the exploitive relations that lay at the base of capitalism. Consequently, Marx neither focused on the symbiotic relationship between system and lifeworld, nor the degree to which the

³See Marx’s (1977) analysis of how labour is embodied in the commodity form in his first chapter of *Capital, Vol. I*.

capitalist system might be compelled to intervene in the lifeworld's culture in order to guarantee its own continued existence.⁴

Not until the 1920's and 30's did an Italian social theorist, Antonio Gramsci, provide a much needed elaboration of Marx's sketchy analysis of the relationship between capitalism and culture. Gramsci (1989) understood very clearly the importance of culture to capitalism. He realized that leading factions of the capitalist class had to invest considerable resources in all aspects of cultural life to shape a set of explanations and legitimations—hegemony—to ensure capitalism persisted. Gramsci recognized, however, that while culture provided capitalists with the means to continue their exploitation of the working class, it also provided the proletariat with the means to oppose their oppression. Gramsci believed that capitalist hegemony could be successfully contested in the cultural realm.

Building upon Gramsci's insights, Sut Jhally (1989) reconceptualizes Gramsci's notion of hegemony as the *formal* subsumption of culture. According to Jhally, "the *formal* subsumption [of culture] refers to a situation where an area of society becomes vital for the functioning of the economic system without actually taking on the structures of the economic system" (p. 72). In this situation, capitalism invests in culture not to make money, but to foster a social climate conducive to capitalist enterprise. With Gramsci, Jhally contends that as long as capitalism resorts to the manipulation of culture to ensure its perpetuation, it risks being challenged. Alternate cultural practices can create interpretations, norms, roles, or institutions—counterhegemonies—to oppose the capitalist mode of production. The history of capitalist modernity has, in fact, been one in which anti-capitalist forces have occasionally mustered powerful campaigns to contest capitalist hegemony.

Adult Education and Modernity

In his analysis of capitalist modernity, Habermas (1987) draws upon Marx's view that alienation is the negative bi-product of capitalism's intrusion into the life of the labourer to contend that the system's intrusion into the lifeworld erodes its culture and weakens its ability to reproduce itself; he describes this intrusion as "the colonization of the lifeworld." During the nineteenth-century, for instance, capitalists initiated a conscious political struggle to dismantle the medieval institutions that impeded increased productivity in Britain's fledgling manufacturing industries (Larrain, 1989). They challenged and overturned feudal restrictions, such as those on free trade, personal freedom of workers, practices of guilds, and usury, initiating in the process a capitalist revolution that spawned an era of unprecedented economic growth. In less than a century, radical political reforms "freed" rural populations from their feudal ties with the land, while fundamental economic reforms that fostered mass production rapidly transformed Britain from an agrarian to an industrial society. The result was massive social upheaval as rural populations, stripped of the means of providing their own sustenance—the land—converged on the industrialized centres to "freely" exchange their only remaining possession—their labour—for wages. This maelstrom of political, economic, and social change transformed, dramatically, not only how people worked but also their way of life. It was in this context that adult education first emerged.

Nineteenth-century reformers looked to adult education to develop cultural forms that would minimize the impact of industrialization. Such reformers fell into two camps: liberal reformers, who proposed *adaptive* adult education programs; and social reformers who proposed *critical* adult education programs. The purpose of the former was to instill in workers values, skills, attitudes, and beliefs that would help them adapt to the new

⁴It should be noted, however, that Marx's occasional reference to capitalism's efforts to deepen the mystification of capitalist social relations through the deliberate production of ideology attests to his understanding of the relationship between the system and lifeworld in modernity. See in particular *The German Ideology* (1947)

bourgeois “way of life”; the purpose of the latter was to help workers recognize the exploitive nature of the new capitalist mode of production.

Throughout its history adult education has continued to serve these two conflicting purposes: supporters of capitalism have used adult education to argue for a culture that addresses, first and foremost, the legitimation and accumulation needs of the system, while critics of capitalism have used adult education to argue for a culture that addresses, first and foremost, the needs of the lifeworld. Consequently, the hegemonic forces of the system have always been opposed by counterhegemonic forces in the lifeworld. At every step, the voices of critical adult educators have contested the role of adult education as a hegemonizing cultural practice. It is this healthy chorus of voices that we fear will be silenced with the commodification of adult education.

The Real Subsumption of Culture

Over the last two decades, significant increases in the commodification of culture suggest a new “way of life” is emerging. The economic crisis of 1973 resulted in an intensive period of economic, social, and cultural restructuring. New computing, communications, and transportation technologies emerged, offering capitalists new ways to control the space and time of their productive environments. Jhally (1989) suggests this signals the *real* subsumption of culture. “Real subsumption,” he argues, “refers to a situation where the media [and other cultural institutions] become not ideological institutions but economic ones. That is, investment in the media is not for the purpose of ideological control but for the purpose of reaping the biggest return. Culture is produced first and foremost as a commodity rather than as ideology” (p. 73).

John Tomlinson (1991), in his discussion of Cornelius Castoriadis’s critique of modernity, argues that the real subsumption of culture—wherein the system invests in culture to produce profits—has created a cultural void at the center of contemporary society, noting that “what Max Weber first called the ‘disenchantment of the world’—the breaking of the spell of traditional belief and practices—leaves a hole at the centre of culture, which Castoriadis believes cannot be adequately filled with stories of growth or development” (p. 164). This cultural void, which is created by the forces of late-capitalism, is the very space the new “culture” industries are rushing to fill.

The new “culture” industries, however, cannot replace the shared meaning frames that constitute the social realities that late-capitalism is destroying. Habermas (1987), for one, is singular in his insistence that a culture cannot be produced from outside the horizons of the lifeworld. A way of life can only be produced through the communicative accomplishments of the lifeworld’s participants. But as David Harvey (1989) notes, the “culture” industries, in fact, have no real interest in creating integrated world views. They are concerned solely with the production of cultural commodities that can be rapidly and easily consumed in any context, that is, cultural artifacts that are detached from any particular meaning frame. This allows such artifacts to be consumed in any cultural milieu, dramatically increasing the size of the market. The fleeting images, infobytes, clichés, fashions, and sound effects that are flooding into the void of late-capitalism are perfect examples of such meaningless cultural artifacts. These products are consumed not because consumers find them meaningful but because they appeal, directly, to the soma of the consumer. Consumers watch TV, listen to CD’s, change fashions because it feels good not because it makes sense. Most importantly, since *rational* justifications need no longer be offered to promote such commodities, it is almost impossible to offer *rational* arguments against their proliferation.

The proliferation of such meaningless cultural commodities has been greatly assisted by the emergence of powerful technologies of representation. The images that are used to promote cultural commodities are now so appealing that they eclipse all other forms of social reality. For example, the fleeting romances of the “soaps” are of more importance to many viewers than their own lives, and CNN’s high-tech rendition of the Gulf War

became, for the many who experienced it on TV, the “real” war. “At the technological level,” writes Debord (1990),

when images chosen and constructed by *someone else* have everywhere become the individual’s principal connection to the world he [*sic*] formerly observed for himself, it has certainly not been forgotten that these images can tolerate anything and everything; because within the same image all things can be juxtaposed *without contradiction* [emphasis added]. The flow of images carries everything before it, and it is similarly someone else who controls at will this simplified summary of the sensible world; who decides where the flow will lead as well as the rhythm of what should be shown, like some perpetual, arbitrary surprise, leaving no time for reflection, and entirely independent of what the spectator might understand or think of it. (pp. 27–28)

The power of the contemporary media is now such that Jean Baudrillard, perhaps the most visionary of contemporary social theorists, goes so far as to suggest that reality no longer exists and that we now all live in a simulacra of fleeting images. This supports Debord’s (1990) contention that “once one controls the mechanism which operates the only form of social verification to be fully and universally recognized, one can say what one likes” (p. 19). The media, Debord warns,

proves its arguments simply by going round in circles: by coming back to the start, by repetition, by constant reaffirming in the only space left where anything can be publicly affirmed, and believed, precisely because that is the only thing to which everyone is witness.... There is no place left where people can discuss the realities which concern them, because they can never lastingly free themselves from the crushing presence of media discourse and of the various forces organized to relay it. Nothing remains of the relatively independent judgement of those who once made up the world of learning; of those, for example, who used to base their self-respect on their ability to verify, to come close to an impartial history of facts, or at least to believe that such a history deserved to be known. (p. 19)

Adult Education and Postmodernity

Since knowledge is very amenable to commodification, adult education may well benefit from the commodification of culture. Adult education entrepreneurs, along with other cultural capitalists, are finding that large profits can be secured by marketing commodities that have immediate appeal and which can be rapidly consumed. Short cycle courses, self-directed learning packages, distance education, and competency-based all serve to reduce the turnover time of production and consumption and maximize profits.

However, the danger is that once adult education becomes this commodified, it ceases to be a cultural practice. It ceases to draw upon the symbolic, upon the meaningful, to foster learning. As it becomes more and more a part of the libidinal economy, it must take its place alongside the many other “culture” industries that are emerging. Rather than convince consumers of the worth of their products, such industries focus on producing products that appeal to the consumer on the nonrational level. Consequently, adult education ceases to provide a cultural space from which such marketing strategies can be critiqued.

The commodification of knowledge and learning presents a dramatic challenge to adult educators who wish to continue the emancipatory cultural practices of adult education. The wanton replacement of integrated cultural totalities with fleeting media generated images destroys any rational basis from which to formulate a critique of the commodification process. Ultimately, the commodification of adult education may well deny adults the opportunity to develop a critique of the commodification process that threatens their very culture. It is imperative, then, that adult educators begin to view adult education as a cultural practice and draw upon its critical potential before the possibility of generating a critique completely disappears.

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