

## **Constructing child consumers and the rest of the world**

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- More evidence of our incredibly, rapidly increasing consumption: the growing need for storage space
  - 3-car garages of 900 square feet are increasingly common in new houses
    - almost the size of a whole average house in the 1950s!
    - often wanted not for cars, but to store accumulating stuff
      - source: affluenza website
  - even more dramatic evidence from the New York Times article on the self-storage industry
    - about 1 in 10 households rent at least one self-storage unit
    - for every Starbuck’s, there are 7 self-storage facilities!
      - not units, but entire complexes with an average area equivalent to 150 units of the largest common size: 10 x 30 feet
    - 7 square feet of rentable storage for every person in the US
    - these complexes are 91% full, even in the current recession
    - and even though the average house is almost twice the size it was 50 years ago
    - were did all that stuff come from?
      - an explosion of purchasing of new stuff
      - and little reuse or resale of what it replaced
        - because the old stuff was still good, just out of style or not needed
    - irony: people paying \$100 a month (\$1,200 each year) to store stuff that they don’t need
      - using money to buy stuff creates a need for even more money to rent storage space
      - multiplying growth
- Robbins’ coverage of “kinderculture” is fairly clear and probably pretty familiar
  - so this will be brief
  - into the 1800s, children and childhood were not as privileged as they are today in the US
  - they worked from a young age
    - on farms
    - at crafts
    - later, in factories
  - during the 1800s and early 1900s, laws were passed to protect children from labor abuses in factories
    - NOT to protect them from farm work, which is even more dangerous
      - so these laws were not simply a response to increasing compassion for kids in general
      - they were specifically a response to the expansion of capitalism, industrialization, and the construction of the laborer
    - but fewer families were living on farms every year
    - and farm labor was increasingly migratory and intentionally invisible to most American consumers... a story for another class]
  - this was part of the process of reconstructing childhood as being more distinct from adulthood than it was previously

- the concept of childhood and children changed
- from children as small version of working adults
- to children as delicate, developing beings who need special treatment
  - including their own small-sized furniture, space, and lots of varied toys
  - in order to develop into properly functioning adults
  - it was parents' responsibility to provide these things
- psychologists began advising on the conditions needed for proper development of the child
  - much of which involved having its own space and privacy
    - an idea foreign, even repugnant, to many other cultures
    - and its own toys with which to exercise, relax, and learn
- rise of retailing and advertising to children in early 20<sup>th</sup> century
  - capture the child, and you capture the mother
- US Government supported this project of turning children into consumers by issuing reports on the needs of children
  - appropriately-sized furniture
  - diversity and quantity of toys
  - importance of letting the child select and own things for him/herself
  - “teaching him that his personality can be expressed through things”
    - do foragers' children need to learn to express their personality through things?
    - is this really a need of human psychology, or another cultural construct specific to our culture of capitalism?
  - [what was really behind this ideology of consumption and technology? Surely more than just pay or campaign contributions... or not?]
- these changes did not affect only children
  - they were part of a shift in ideas of normal, healthy adult values, too
- advertisers aim to get children to nag parents to buy, said to be behind up to a third of family visits to fast food restaurants or certain kinds of stores
- technique: work on children's need for acceptance, fear of being a “loser”
  - does this work on older people, too?
- Suggestion: adults may be acting more and more like the children that marketers target
  - today's adults freely acknowledge wanting and having “toys”
    - something that would have been embarrassing or worse to adults of a generation or two ago
    - a truck with a Harley-Davidson decal in the back window saying “Bad-ass girls drive bad-ass toys”
      - this is not by or about children
      - yet it embodies values that were being constructed specifically among children only a few generations ago
    - bumper sticker: “He who dies with the most toys, wins”
      - again, clearly by and about adults
      - perhaps ironic, but still expressing what were recently values that adults would not have considered appropriate
- retail stores worked to redefine childhood, especially reorienting Christmas

- glorifies consumption
- master stroke: being good is rewarded with commodities
  - good children are consumers!
- Santa and his elves “sanitize” gifts that actually come from miserable factories full of poor laborers
- example of commercial creation of Christmas:
  - “Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer” was written in 1939 by Robert May, a copy writer for Montgomery Ward stores
  - it was printed and given away to customers, as a replacement for the purchased coloring books they had given away in previous years
- People began buying Christmas goods after Thanksgiving, so FDR moved Thanksgiving up a week to extend the buying season!
- Grimm’s fairy tales (or worse, Struwwelpeter tales) were gruesome, scary stories meant to frighten children into following the stories precepts or morals
  - they encouraged obedience, responsibility, hard work, modesty, thrift
  - certainly not consumption or self-gratification
- Replaced by happier, sanitized tales that emphasized pleasure and consumption
  - especially L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*
  - Baum was a retailer himself, then a store display designer
  - the founder of an organization for store window trimmers and a journal on store displays – a professional marketing man
  - he shared the mind-cure view of getting the most out of life now, by consuming
  - who “will be the gainer [i.e. win the competition!] when Death calls him to the last account – the man who can say “I have lived!” or the man who can say “I have saved?” ... eat, drink and be merry – tomorrow you die.”
  - Oz was full of consumable wonders
  - legitimized self-fulfillment through consumption
  - was this just a reflection of changing culture, or a conscious effort by a marketing guy to promote a pro-consumption attitude?
- Walt Disney continued a similar process with Disneyland and Disney World
  - portrays an idealized world
  - centered on clean, idealized, scaled-down “Main Street” of shops and restaurants
    - where everyone is defined by what they sell
    - no classes, no crime, no conflict
    - just consumption (visitors now spend more time shopping, buying food, and eating than waiting for and taking rides)
  - in which invention, technology, and business create progress, improving the world
    - progress is natural and American
  - consciously portrays history “as it should have been”
    - heavily revised to edit out the ugly
      - as in the Nez Percé Chief Joseph speech
    - and make un-ignorable problems like slavery into errors that were recognized and solved
  - history is literally told by the corporations that have interests in it

- at Epcot Center, Exxon presents the history of energy, General Motors the history of transportation, etc.
- GM lauds the constant technical improvements in its cars
  - not the marketing techniques that are widely credited with GM's success:
    - market segmentation (marketing different lines of cars to different categories of potential buyers)
    - planned obsolescence (getting people to buy a new car just because it is new)
    - easy credit
  - technical progress is good and the main thing that drives businesses, improving peoples' lives
    - does planned obsolescence really improve peoples' lives?
- most visitors are high income professionals who work for or with corporations
  - very few African-Americans or Hispanics
- so the sanitized Disney worldview justifies and legitimizes the world of the majority of the visitors
  - nominally for kids
  - but actually pushing a worldview on them that is congenial to their parents, even if the parents know better if they would choose to think about it
  - masking the harm in consumption
- The importance of “kinderculture”
  - Children grow up to be adults
  - Adults know that Santa Claus and Disney's version of America and history are fiction
    - when they stop to think about it
  - But childhood beliefs shape habits of thought
    - emotional associations or meanings
    - assumptions and general sense of the world
    - Grimm's fairy tales worked to shape morals
    - so does Woolworth's Santa Claus and Baum's Oz
    - would we buy as much at Christmas if, instead of happy elves, we thought of Chinese factories?
  - Fictions that are supposedly for children are reinforced in the minds of adults as they pass them on to children
  - They provide a way to “carelessly” think about society without constantly facing ugly realities
  - Ideas such as
    - the normal route to happiness is through consumption
    - progress is driven by invention, is good, and is American
    - the world is relatively fair and just
- mask the reality
  - give us a comfortable world view
  - which we can deny when necessary as adults
  - but which allow us to overlook and live with the contradictions and consequences of our daily lifestyle

- Robbins’ coverage of the spread (“export”) of the consumer role is also pretty clear
  - people in other countries are adopting the consumer role faster than people in the US did
    - where the role had to develop initially
    - others can now see and emulate it in its fully formed state
  - People want to emulate American consumer culture
    - [why?
      - advertising? Blonde white babies in Peruvian powdered milk ads?
      - or is there really something universally attractive about consumption after all, if it is actually attainable?]
    - huge numbers of Indians and Chinese becoming consumers
    - very rapid growth of consumption, malls, credit, homeownership, etc. in those countries
    - similar pattern of extended family households breaking up into smaller units
      - children increasingly expecting to move out and found their own households
      - with each needing its own appliances, furniture, etc.
- but the earth cannot sustain a lot more people consuming at the rate we have been
  - the spread of the consumer role is creating “a desire that cannot be satisfied”
  - the inevitable dissatisfaction may lead to
    - protest
    - violence
    - wish to return to one’s own past, before these social and economic problems arose and their values were changed by foreign influences
      - fundamentalism and xenophobia
      - that is, terrorism a la Al Qaeda
      - which is largely a reaction against the materialist corruption of the modern capitalist world
      - seeking to restore 9<sup>th</sup>-century Islam, often down to the most mundane details
      - much like other fundamentalist movements
        - some Christian sects in the US
        - some Hindus in India, etc.
    - riots?
    - wars?
    - revolution?