ABSTRACT. This paper considers the place of education within our “consumers’ society”, beginning with Hannah Arendt’s account of the rise of consumerism to a position of political dominance and the resulting eclipse of public life. Connections are then made between Arendt’s account of this rise and Jean Baudrillard’s account of the postmodern proliferation of signs and the transformation of the sign into a commodity. This radical “semiurgy” accelerates into a self-referential series of signs which entails the loss of reality – it contributes to the disappearance of the human subjectivity behind the creation of images. I argue that Baudrillard does not respond adequately to the dynamic that he describes so well. By contrast, Arendt’s concept of natality, I suggest, prepares the ground for a response to the forces of commodification that colonize the educational environment and threaten its critical possibilities. As youth and schools receive more and more attention from advertisers, students are sold by educational institutions to commercial interests who seek unfettered access to this “captive audience”. Yet education is profoundly compromised when youths are viewed as consumers and not as a social investment, when education is viewed merely as an opportunity to secure a new market.

KEY WORDS: advertising, Arendt, Baudrillard, consumerism, critical pedagogy, semiotics, the public realm

We are, as it seems, considering not only how a city, but also a luxurious city, comes into being... Let’s look at a feverish city...This healthy one isn’t adequate any more, but must already be gorged with a bulky mass of things. Republic, Book II, 372e–373b

We can’t let the terrorists stop us from shopping

We can observe just how much Western society has become a consumers’ society even within the last 50 years by considering that during World War II the Western world was called upon to demonstrate restraint and reduce their spending habits, while following September 11 we were called upon to accelerate our consumption. Furthermore, we can observe that advertising and
marketing to youths is one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy, and that over $170 billion was spent marketing to "Generation Y" in 2003 (Greenspan, 2003). Western society is increasingly oriented around consumption: the act of consumption, the desire to consume, and the extensive communicative apparatus designed to celebrate consumption and elaborate its signification. The above quotation suggests that this danger was recognized as far back as ancient Greece; Socrates displays an understanding of the distinction between a healthy and 'feverish' city, and notes that this transition might lead to war: "After that won't we go to war as a consequence?" (Plato, 1986, 373 d–e) In its neo-imperialist quest to establish new markets and satiate our own 'feverish city', the Western world extends its reach and draws all nations into its orbit, surely one of the defining features of our age. It is essential to address the growing prevalence of consumerism: Benjamin Barber asserts that the proliferation of Western consumerism and commercial values constitute a new "soft" power of "McWorld's assiduously commercialized and ambitiously secularist materialism" (Barber, 2001, p. xxvi), responsible for breeding violent expressions of anti-Western sentiments. These sentiments are "the forces of disintegral tribalism and reactionary fundamentalism" which "inadvertently contribute to the causes of terrorism" (Barber, 2001, p. xi). Through the lens of two contemporary philosophers, this paper will connect the progressive acceleration of Western consumerism and key ways in which consumerism impacts schooling.

The twentieth century philosophers Hannah Arendt and Jean Baudrillard are rarely connected, yet there are significant areas of overlap regarding both their account of consumerism and their contribution to our understanding of the challenges presented to educators by modern consumers' society. A deeper and more original understanding of consumerism can be attained by drawing together these two thinkers. Both explain the recent trend of making what is private become public: Baudrillard describes this as making the private 'explicit,' while Arendt outlines the modern ascent of the activities of the private realm or oikos into the public realm. Secondly, both observe that human relations have been dramatically altered and are increasingly mediated by objects. For Baudrillard this entails the eclipse of reality, while for Arendt it entails a loss of the public realm. Hannah Arendt opens The Human Condition with a description of Sputnik, an exemplar for all that is wrong and dangerous in modernity. The passengers on this "earth-born object
made by man [sic]’’ (Arendt, 1958, p. 1) would be the first to fully inhabit a realm entirely of human creation, released from the confines of the human condition of earthly existence to fully enter the realm of the human artifice. For Arendt, this event, a “rebellion against human existence as it has been given” (Arendt, 1958, p. 2), indicates the magnitude of our worldly alienation. This rebellion means the loss of the polis and erosion of speech, in which we “adopt a way of life in which speech is no longer meaningful,” and “move in a world where speech has lost its power” (Arendt, 1958, p. 4). Jean Baudrillard points towards similar recent events: the proliferation of signs combined with the separation of the sign from the object leaves humans inhabiting a symbolic realm entirely of their own making, entailing an “eclipse of the real”. Just as we come to inhabit the realm of the human artifice, so too do we dwell in the realm of signs, symbols, and simulations. Baudrillard’s original work in semiotics will provide a new analysis of consumer society, and help explain how communication structures and sign systems can preserve consumer society long after speech has been drained of its power and meaning.

After a brief review of the first analysts of consumerism, I will consider Hannah Arendt’s The Human Condition. Arendt outlines her key ideas regarding the polis, the oikos, and the three central human actions (labor, work, and action), and documents the historical ascent of the oikos to a place of political dominance such that the polis is undermined. I will then turn to Jean Baudrillard and consider his theory of the ascent of consumerism and the proliferation of signs. This will reveal a shortcoming in Arendt: although she does discuss communication and ‘speech,’ her theory doesn’t account for how communication can be used to enhance consumption; she lacks a theory of how consumerism functions at the level of signification, or the postmodern separation of the commodity (or signified) from its sign. Next, I will consider the consequences of this ascent: the loss of the polis in Arendt, and loss of ‘the real’ in Baudrillard. Unlike Baudrillard, while Arendt documents the ascent of the social realm and loss of the world through worldly alienation, she leaves a way out-natality and political action- and maintains a vision of politics which celebrates the possibilities and potentialities of action. Lastly, I will consider the political implications of consumerism within the realm of education. Growing corporate inroads into this realm have increasingly turned education into an extension of the economy through both the demand that education serve the dictates of the marketplace and economic growth, and through the inroads of
advertising and marketing into youth culture within the educational environment. Arendt and Baudrillard will reveal that when our political realm is dominated by signs and images of consumption, when our schools are subverted by consumerism, reality is eclipsed and our public realm is compromised.

RISE OF CONSUMERISM

Before turning to Baudrillard and Arendt, a brief discussion of the rise of consumerism and its first analysts will be considered in order to set the historical context of our modern consumers' society. While there is much that can be said regarding the origin of consumption, there remain several uncontestable facts: first, we have always engaged in consumption since our most primitive times; second, our very physical survival depends on consumption; third, we are all consumers in some way. But it will become apparent in this paper that there are unprecedented developments which point towards the political centrality of consumption.

Some have argued that Karl Marx, engaged with problems associated with the process of industrialization in the early nineteenth century, focused primarily on human labor and the material conditions of production as the primary determinants of human consciousness. Thus, that Marx did not adequately address consumption or the communication of symbolic meaning through the process of cultural signification, and therefore was unable to consider the extent to which signs and symbols could become commodities themselves, just as much as the use-object (Ewen, 1976; Bocock, 1993; Aldridge, 2003). Consumerism has been portrayed as a process by which the energies for political resistance are drained and diverted into individual material gratification, and oppressive class structures and endemic alienation thereby obscured. For example, in tracing the origin of advertising Stewart Ewen suggests that “the factory had not been an effective arena for forging a predictable and reliable workforce” (Ewen, 1976, p. 46). Thus, rather than labor and production constituting the site of discipline and control, advertising emerged because other forms of social control failed. Traditional Marxist analysis has therefore suffered from a “productivist bias”. Yet power dynamics and social control are just as important in the development and regulation of signs; the control of the mode of signification is as important as the mode of production.
Perhaps because of rising affluence and an expanding middle class, consumerism began to emerge towards the turn of the century as a social and political concern. It became an important topic of study to such sociologists as Thorstein Veblen, George Simmel and perhaps most notably Max Weber. In *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 1958) Weber argued that the rise of capitalism was based on Puritanical self-denial and the moral commandment to reinvest capital into business. While it may be the case that the early stages of modern capitalism were characterized by these values, Jean Baudrillard reveals that this account is limited in its ability to articulate the problems of modern consumer society. Capitalism must unleash the desire to spend. It must advocate hedonistic self-indulgence, not Puritanical self-denial.

Simmel and Veblen described the extent to which consumerism arose as an attempt to mark oneself off as different from others so as to enable one to establish and express a distinct social identity. This emerged in response to the growing homogenizing forces of mechanization and technology, caused by industrialization and growing urbanization and crowding. In contrast to Weber’s theory of Puritanical self-restraint, people began to consume as a principal mode of self-expression; consumerism became a common language through which we ‘read’ or ‘interpret’ shared cultural signs. This pattern accelerated after World War II such that the second half of the twentieth century has witnessed an unprecedented growth of consumerism, and the experience of participation and membership in society today is increasingly contingent on habits of consumption. As McLaren and Leonardo state, “[P]eople become functions of consumer society as they are motivated to purchase more and more objects in order to feel part of the social milieu” (McLaren et al., 1998, p. 4). Consumerism has taken on a new form in which it has come to dominate our political life and our primary communicative apparatus through the proliferation of signs. It has become central to our entire way of life, permeating our experience of citizenship and the practice of politics and, as we shall see, contemporary schooling.

**HANNAH ARENDT: CONSUMING THE POLIS**

Hannah Arendt provides a theoretical framework to explain how the public realm has been eroded by the emergence of the private forces of production and consumption, and the ensuing eclipse of politics
replaced by ‘the social’. Yet there is a great deal of misunderstanding of Arendt, particularly regarding her public/private distinction, which leads to a misreading of Arendt as a liberal. She is therefore thought to emphasize the importance of protecting the private sphere of free, rights-bearing, rational autonomous agents, who engage in politics only so as to preserve their privacy. However, Arendt’s distinction between public and private is grounded in what she terms the “ontological roots” of the three activities of human life, the corresponding three “conditions” of human existence. She terms these the “basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man” (Arendt, 1958, p. 7). These distinctions therefore refer to how we experience ourselves and others and relate to the world around us. This distinction and these activities constitute the central themes of her best known work, *The Human Condition* and provide the conceptual structure Arendt uses to explain the rise of our consumers’ society.

Within Arendt’s typology, labor is grounded within “the human condition of life”, the biological life-process to which we are bound by virtue of being human, compelled to submit to and preoccupy ourselves with self-preservation and species-preservation. Labor is the private activity that provides for the biological continuation of life, in which the human body “concentrates on nothing but its own being alive” (Arendt, 1958, p. 115). Because none of the products of human labor are lasting or durable, labor is described as ‘futile’. It is the activity in which we are irrevocably bound to the unending cyclical process of production and consumption, the “two stages through which the ever-recurrent cycle of biological life must pass” (Arendt, 1958, p. 131). This cyclical character of labor makes private life uniform and the private realm, or *oikos*, a location of conformity and sameness.

Privacy here implies ‘privative’, or deprivation; to be deprived of something essential. However, Arendt does not simply condemn labor or the private realm: rather, labor is considered an important human activity, and the *oikos* respected as a place where we can feel “sheltered against the world” (Arendt, 1958, p. 59). Yet as long as we are bound up within this process and restricted to our own privacy, our efforts remain futile and we remain isolated within ourselves, unable to engage in the realm of human affairs and effectively disclose ourselves and our experiences through speech. We are pulled into the cyclical process of production and consumption and exist in a “mere togetherness” within the private realm, where we are neither seen nor heard in our full humanness.
Continuing with Arendt’s description of the rise of consumerism through the lens of the private/public distinction and their corresponding activities, Arendt contrasts labor with action. Action expresses our highest potentialities and possibilities, through which we are known by others, disclose our uniqueness, and participate in something larger than ourselves. A life without action “is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men” (Arendt, 1958, p. 76). Whereas labor was grounded in the “human condition of life”, action is grounded in the human condition of plurality. It is the articulation of difference, of alteritas, where we distinguish ourselves from others. As it is the “only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter” (Arendt, 1958, p. 7), by acting we experience ourselves and each other without mediating these relations with objects or commodities. It is through action that our identity and our uniqueness can be disclosed and made known to others, through which we “insert ourselves into the human world” (Arendt, 1958, p. 176). This human world Arendt calls the ‘space of appearance’, the public realm, or the polis.

The polis and action are closely intertwined and mutually interdependent: while action is needed to preserve the polis, so too is the polis needed to preserve action; while the polis is the location for action, so too is it the place where action is preserved and memorialized through speech. The polis is where we not only differentiate ourselves from others, but also differentiate between “activities related to a common world and those related to the maintenance of life” (Arendt, 1958, p. 28) such as production and consumption. The polis provides the location for both self-disclosure and its preservation; it affords a remedy for the futility of action and speech by preventing it from fading into obscurity. Through self-disclosure Arendt closely links action with speech, stating that “speechless action would no longer be action” (Arendt, 1958, p. 178). For along with ‘deeds,’ speech is how actors both disclose themselves and preserve or ‘memorialize’ action. Although labor and the oikos may include “speech” of a sort, she insists that “no other human performance requires speech to the same extent as action” (Arendt, 1958, p. 179).

For Arendt, the public and private realms and their corresponding activities are not historically static in their relation to each other; that is, they may change in relative importance throughout history. Beginning with the rise of the ‘labor theorists’, from John Locke through Adam Smith to Karl Marx, action and the bios politikos
(political life) have been marginalized while the private concerns of consumption and production have been elevated into a place of political dominance. This historical dynamic of the modern reversal of public and private spheres Arendt terms the rise of ‘the social realm’: “the emergence of the social realm... is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age” (Arendt, 1958, p. 28). With this loss of action and the public sphere, freedom becomes reduced to routinized ‘behaviour’, difference and plurality to conformism and uniformity, speech and self-disclosure to relentless production and consumption. Instead of experiencing the freedom associated with action and speech in the public realm, humans are reduced to mere adjuncts to the cycle of production and consumption. The polis in turn is required to enable this cycles’ smooth functioning and progressive acceleration. The social realm is a community centered around the cyclical process of production and consumption, in which human self-understanding becomes based on “possessive individualism” (MacPhailson, 1962) and speech subjugated to commercial discourse. It is the end of action and speech.

Between action and labor Arendt situates work, the activity which corresponds to the human capacity to build and maintain those physical things essential for political life. It is the process by which we transform nature into the human artifice which constitutes the physical world within which political life occurs. Arendt finds this exemplified in a table and chair, suggesting that while the products of labor are to be immediately consumed, work differs in terms of duration: tables and chairs last long enough to provide the stability which is required for political life to emerge. Furthermore, this example points towards the way in which the human artifice draws humans together at the same time that it separates them and allows for distinctness and plurality to become manifested. However, the social realm implies that the products of work are increasingly ‘consumed’, drawn into the cyclical movement of production and consumption, and no longer provide a lasting and stable human artifice for political community. Arendt states that in the social realm “we have changed work into laboring” (Arendt, 1958, p. 126), and that “the rate of use is so tremendously accelerated that the objective difference between use and consumption, between the relative durability of use objects and the swift coming and going of consumer goods, dwindles to insignificance” (Arendt, 1958, p. 125). Worldly alienation arises when our physical structures, built to provide the
lasting and durable environment for political life, are caught up in the accelerating process of decay, lost to the endless stream of consumption and production. The activities of labor and work are anti-political and destructive of politics and culture: they result “in the leveling of all human activities to the common denominator of securing the necessities of life and providing for their abundance” (Arendt, 1958, p. 126).

A community arises from the activity of work: the agora, the exchange market. However, unlike the polis, this community is motivated by “the desire for products, not people”, where humans express themselves “not [as] persons but producers of products” (Arendt, 1958, p. 209). Like tables and chairs, the products of work enable a context for action and speech, not merely exchange. The social realm then is characterized by not only the celebration of the private activities of production and consumption, but the ascent of exchange to a place of political dominance. The rise of the oikos and agora eclipse – even consume – the polis.

It is for these reasons that “it is frequently said that we live in a consumer society” (Arendt, 1958, p. 126). This becomes a self-perpetuating dynamic: just as the rise of consumption erodes the polis, consumerism is strengthened when we are denied meaningful political life. We are no longer Aristotle’s zoon politikon (political animal, or animal of the polis), but live within ‘the social’ as if merely zoon, according to biological preservation. Work and labor are thought to transcend the imperatives of biological preservation; the good life of the polis is believed to be characterized by the accumulation of goods rather than political action or speech. Thus, the social realm emerges as the location of a “mere togetherness” characterized by exchange and decay, futility and speechlessness.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD: CONSUMING SIGNS

We have seen how Arendt’s use of the public/private distinction and the activities of labor, work and action, explain the rise of consumer society. While Arendt was primarily a political philosopher, Baudrillard’s analysis of consumer society draws from the disciplines of semiotics, psychoanalysis and political economy. In drawing from these disciplines, Baudrillard provides an extensive analysis of the various dimensions of consumption. We will begin by considering the intellectual environment from which Baudrillard emerged.
Perhaps the most important philosophical movement this century has been the postmodernism and poststructuralism which has emerged from post-World War II France. With its roots in Nietzsche and Heidegger and the linguistics of Saussure, and grounded in the deconstruction of metaphysics and the “linguistic turn” towards considering the character of discourse and communication, postmodernism has radically and permanently altered the landscape of Western philosophy. Emphasizing fragmentation, alterity, aporia, incommensurability, and multiplicity, it emerged in part as a critical response to Marxism and the totalizing quality of Hegel’s historical dialectics, from what Michael Peters describes as “the desire to bring to an end traditional Marxist intellectual culture...and to develop an alternative left culture” (Peters, 1998, p. 4). I will begin discussing Baudrillard by continuing his consideration of speech within his theory of signification, and then consider the implications of the separation of the sign from the commodity. I will then observe the implications of this development in the loss of reality and the making public of what was previously private, consider the psychoanalytic dimensions of consumerism, and conclude with the question of the possibility of resisting the ‘code.’

We can recall that speech was of great importance to Arendt, specifically regarding its link with action and the polis, and the decline of speech resulting from the ascent of the social realm. While Arendt insisted that speech was associated with action and absent from the isolated private life of consumption and production, Baudrillard outlines the spread of speech through the signs and symbols of commercial discourse. Baudrillard agrees with Arendt that the type of discourse and communication that dominates consumer society is not ‘speech’ or language: “The object/advertising system constitutes a system of signification, but not language, for it lacks an active syntax: it has the simplicity and effectiveness of a code” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b; p. 22). Elsewhere he asserts that “[t]his is undoubtedly the most impoverished of languages: full of signification and empty of meaning. It is a language of signals” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 20). While this syntax of consumption is certainly not ‘speech’ as understood by Arendt, we can observe how the mode of communication within consumer society constitutes a legitimate topic of study, and effectively drowns out any political speech. Advertising and marketing become the signs and language and entire communicative structure within our society, which come to dominate all other forms of discourse and signification.
While Arendt asserts that labor and work are speechless and emphasizes the link between action and speech, for Baudrillard communication systems are important within the consumers’ society; he provides an account of the political importance of the production of signs. Several decades after Arendt, Baudrillard writes at a time when consumerism has accelerated and moved into a new ‘hyper’ form, when the discourse of consumption has become even more dominant. This suggests that consumer society is increasingly based on a new type of communication. “Hyper” society can be characterized as an acceleration of Arendt’s “social realm,” which becomes dominated by the proliferation of signs. As Douglas Kellner suggests, for Baudrillard modernity was concerned primarily with the production of objects, while postmodernism is concerned with simulation and the production of signs: “Modernity thus centered on the production of things – commodities and products – while postmodernity is characterized by radical semiurgy, by a proliferation of signs” (Kellner, 1996, p. 4). This shift points towards Baudrillard’s critique of Marx under the influence of postmodern linguistics and semiotics.

Like many of his colleagues and contemporaries within the French postmodern scene, Baudrillard critically engaged Marxist theory. Perhaps the central issue regarding Baudrillard’s criticism of Marx concerns the shift from the production of objects to the production of signs, from the means of production to the means of consumption, or “the simultaneous production of the commodity as sign and the sign as commodity” (McLaren et al., 1998, p. 222). As a result, the Marxist categories of consciousness, power, subordination and authority are apparent within the mode of signification, not production. As Peter McLaren and Zeus Leonardo describe this dynamic, “[d]omination no longer resides primarily in the control of the means of production. Rather, domination can be attributed more to control of the means of consumption. Moreover, this is accomplished at the level of the mode of signification (previously mode of production) in everyday life” (McLaren et al., 1998, p. 223). Furthermore, for Baudrillard, consumer society is not driven by the needs and demands of consumers, but rather by excessive productive capacity: “the fundamental problem of contemporary capitalism is no longer” production, but rather “the contradiction between a virtually unlimited productivity and the need to dispose of the product. It becomes vital for the system at this stage to control not
only the mechanism of production, but also consumer demand” (Baudrillard, 2001a,b, p. 41).

This shift in emphasis from production to consumption parallels the tendency within postmodern linguistics to separate the signifier from the signified; within Baudrillard’s semiotic analysis of consumer society, this takes on the character of a separation between the commodity and its sign. “In order to become an object of consumption, the object must become a sign... It is in this way that it becomes ‘personalized,’ and enters into a series, etc.: it is never consumed in its materiality, but in its difference” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 25). Advertisements have become more powerful and persuasive because of this separation. Previously, goods were presented based largely on their material qualities and function, however this gradually gave way to an association of the sign with a lifestyle and integration with the social life of people. Through the transformation of the commodity into a sign, the sign is able to enter into a ‘series’ in which it becomes immersed within the endless stream of signs. This forms the ‘code’ of commercial discourse. The pitch of this discourse relentlessly increases, as each sign seeks to drown out the ‘noise’ generated by other signs. It becomes deafening; but to mix metaphors, it also begins to dominate our vision, blinding us, blurring into an endless stream of flashing images.

For Baudrillard, as a result of this separation, “we disappear behind our images” (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 4). The dominance of the code, the proliferation of signs, and the violence of the image entails the eclipse – even death – of the real. “The image...is violent because what happens there is the murder of the Real, the vanishing point of reality” (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 4). Furthermore, this dynamic is self-perpetuating, as signs “must [proliferate indefinitely] in order continuously to fulfill the absence of reality” (Baudrillard, 2001a,b, p. 28). Hannah Arendt would share this diagnosis: “Modern man did not gain this world when he lost the other world” (Arendt, 1958, p. 320). Arendt describes the dynamic of the loss of reality and loss of the world through the ascent of the oikos and agora to a place of political dominance. Just as reality is lost, so too is the polis, the realm of human affairs. For Arendt, this was the only place in which we experienced each other “without the intermediary of things of matter” (Arendt, 1958, p. 7). For Baudrillard, “men of wealth are no longer surrounded by other human beings, as they have been in the past, but by objects. Their daily exchange is no longer with their fellows, but rather, statistically as a function of some ascending curve,
with the acquisition and manipulation of goods and messages” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 32).

Just as consumerism entails the loss of reality, so too does it point towards the process by which what was previously private becomes public. In Baudrillard’s recent essay *The Violence of the Image* he outlines how the predominance and ‘violence’ of the image makes what was once private become explicit. This is achieved through the “violence of transparency” the “total elimination of secrecy” (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 4). This parallels Arendt’s description of the historical process by which the private realm rose to a place of political dominance. Furthermore, just as Arendt outlined the ascent of labor and work, the *oikos* and the *agora*, which we in turn have come to inhabit, Baudrillard asserts that “we [are] becoming functional. We are living the period of the objects: that is, we live by their rhythm, according to their incessant cycles. Today, it is we who are observing their birth, fulfillment, and death; whereas in all previous civilizations, it was the object, instrument, and perennial monument that survived the generations of men” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 32).

The making explicit of the inner workings of privacy points towards an analysis of the psychodynamics of consumption and consumerism, which Baudrillard explores throughout many of his key works. While Max Weber associated capitalism with Puritanism, Baudrillard asserts that consumer society “replaces a puritan morality with a hedonistic morality” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 16). Central to his thought is the notion that consumption and consumerism do not correspond to the notion of need, desire or pleasure, a confusion which occurs because the sign and object have been separated and the sign has become a commodity to be consumed. For Baudrillard, “material goods are not the objects of consumption; they are merely the objects of need and satisfaction” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 24). Yet consumerism does not satisfy needs, because needs cannot be satisfied. Baudrillard describes consumption in terms of two acts, a double meaning which can be easily lost in the translation of the French “consommer”: first, fulfillment or completion, the realization of intended use and reconciliation of inherent tension, in the sense of “consummation”, and second annulment or negation, to be used up, worn out, or eaten, as in “the fire consumed the building” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 30). There are no limits to consumption; we want to consume more and more; Baudrillard speaks of the “compulsion to consume” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 28). Furthermore,
consumption does not satisfy desire: “the discourse of advertising only arouses desire in order to generalize it in the most vague terms” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 21). It is this confusion that occludes both the unprecedented character of consumption today and its more insidious dynamics: that consumption is more deeply associated with the experience of lack: “It is ultimately because consumption is founded on a lack that it is irrepressible” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 28). The signs of consumption impose a profound lack which is a longing for something that is not there and can never be completed; “there can be no final, physical satiation” (Bocock, 1993, p. 69). There is nothing behind the sign, only an endlessly accelerating noise and blur. Consumption cannot be consummated, but is the “frustrated desire for totality” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 28).

While it may be true that humans have always endowed objects with symbolic meaning which in turn served communicative functions, Baudrillard has provided several key points for understanding the uniqueness of modern consumerism. While this account is not at all exhaustive nor entirely uncontestable, it provides a helpful starting point for differentiating consumerism from earlier historical stages. From the above discussion we can deduce that consumerism entails the growing political importance of the production of signs over the production of objects, that human relations are mediated by these signs, that consumer discourse does not constitute a language but rather a ‘code’ of ‘signals’, that our disappearance behind the image results in the death of the real and simultaneous violence of transparency through the making explicit of privacy, and that our compulsion to consume and resulting experience of lack, insatiability, frustration. Thus, we see that like Arendt, Baudrillard does not share Lyotard’s “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1979, p. xxiv).

For Baudrillard, not only are we never satiated and always frustrated, but there is little possibility of resistance. For “the collective function of advertising is to convert us all to the code...The code is totalitarian; no one escapes it: our individual flights do not negate the fact that each day we participate in its collective elaboration” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 22). The code comes to dominate us, to enchain us, by “imposing a coherent and collective vision, like an almost inseparable totality. Like a chain that connects not ordinary objects but signifieds, each object can signify the other in a more complex super-object, and lead the consumer to a series of more complex choices” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 34). Consumers essen-
tially ‘buy’ into the code of consumption so completely that they lose the capacity for critical reflection. Furthermore, any form of resistance is readily incorporated and assimilated back into the code. Rather than allowing dissention, they maintain order and restrain resistance: “[t]heir proliferation, simultaneously arbitrary and coherent, is the best vehicle for social order, equally arbitrary and coherent, to materialize itself effectively under the sign of affluence” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 20). Peter McLaren and Zeus Leonardo argue that “Baudrillard lacks the critical element of subjective agency in his theory of consumerism” (McLaren et al., 1998, p. 221). As will become apparent upon returning to Arendt, this proves problematic. However, before considering this issue any further, consumerism as outlined by these two thinkers will be used to illuminate the consequences of its manifestation within the realm of education.

THE CONSUMER SOCIETY AND EDUCATION

Although there has been some work done over the last 10 or 12 years on consumerism, this topic remains undertheorized within educational thought. However, in doing so it is not my intention to minimize the problems associated with a host of other important issues in education, from standardization and high-stakes testing to disciplinary practices and class sizes, or to detract from the important scholarly work being done on them. Nor is it to suggest that there was once a golden age long ago when schooling was pure and just and uninfluenced by political problems around it. Rather, my intention is to suggest that the proliferation of signs and ascent of the oikos and agora to a place of political dominance is increasingly apparent in the field of education, and that constructing young consumers has become a growing element of the socialization process and a central component of the educative project. Therefore, in this Section I will outline key ways in which consumerism impacts schooling and consider several resulting questions and implications.

Any teacher will attest to the profound influence of consumerism within their classes and the deep grip which consumer values have on their students. As youth and schools receive more and more attention from advertisers, school space in North America is being increasingly colonized by the images and logos of commercial discourse. Yet education is profoundly compromised when youth are viewed as consumers and not as a social investment, and when education is
viewed as an opportunity to secure a new market. Henry Giroux has written widely on this issue, and observes that “schools are being transformed into commercial rather than public spheres as students become subject to the whims and practices of marketers whose agenda has nothing to do with critical learning and a great deal to do with restructuring civic life in the image of market culture. Civic courage—upholding the most basic non-commercial principles of democracy—as a defining principle of society is devalued as corporate power transforms school knowledge” (Giroux, 2000, p. 173). As Kerry T. Burch describes this dynamic, “[N]owadays, most schools are not producing critically reflective democratic citizens; they are far more engaged in the mass production of idiocy. I use this phrase with precision: the ancient Greek etymology of idios refers to a ‘purely private person,’ one who could participate in the polis as a citizen, but did not” (Burch, 2000, p. 197). One can hear an echo of Arendt’s description of the parallel between the oikos and idios.

Advertising has become perhaps the most important influence on the socialization process; in Baudrillard’s terms, “the code is a form of socialization” (Baudrillard, 2001a, b, p. 23). Today, schoolchildren are exposed to thousands of advertising images per day, and the environment of formal education is itself now drawn into this trend. Desperate schools turn to corporate advertisers for revenue, and well-intentioned principals and administrators all too often welcome the benefits and additional income. Their arguments, for example concerning fast food in the cafeteria and pop machines in the halls, are that “kids eat junk anyhow,” and “advertising is everywhere.” Students are sold by educational institutions to commercial interests who seek unfettered access to this “captive audience”. Through this process the state is complicit in the delivery of a generation of students into the hands of advertisers. However, considering that the young will determine the character of our future, the commercialization of school space and curricula has significant long term social implications. As Henry Giroux states, “when public education becomes a venue for making a profit, delivering a product, or constructing consuming subjects, education reneges on its responsibilities for creating a democracy of citizens by shifting its focus to producing a democracy of consumers” (Giroux, 2000, p. 173).

This dynamic raises several important questions concerning education: what is the difference between educating students and acquiring new consumers? When do schools become commercial
spheres rather than educational environments? When does educating students for a democratic society instead become education for life-long consumption? When does media influence turn education into “edutainment”? When do schools facilitate the transformation of our culture into a consumer culture? As noted educational thinker Neil Postman asks, “whose schools are they?” (Postman, 1969, p. 24). The commercialization of education and the “corporate pedagogy of advertising” (Burch, 2000, p. 197) entails the marginalization of the ethical, social and political dimensions of education.

Yet this trend can be observed within the daily life of any student: even before entering a school building a student may be exposed to advertising images, as they begin their day by boarding a school bus labeled with ads, inside and out; once entering the school building their bathrooms and hallways may have posters; upon entering their classroom, they may find that their artwork and class projects have been replaced with more billboards; before their lesson begins, they may be required to watch several minutes of Channel One, an American broadcaster who “charges advertisers $200,000 per 30 s advertising spot” (Shaker, 1999, p. 1); when they pull out their textbooks they may find that their cover is provided by “Cover Designs” and displays another advertisement; once they open their textbook, their math exercises may include examples which refer to corporations, or their biology book may refer to recent achievements by a large pharmaceutical corporation; their classroom activities may include brainstorming to develop new product ideas, or completing surveys and market research studies; once they leave their classroom they may find that their cafeteria serves unhealthy fast food and that their sports teams wear uniforms dominated by corporate logos. While this would certainly be a dystopian day in the life, each of these activities has been well documented.1

We can ask why corporations and advertisers would want access to public schools. First, youths spend in excess of $172 billion per year (Greenspan, 2003). Secondly, youths can exert tremendous sway over their parents’ spending habits, through what marketers have termed the “nag” factor, and in 2000 “influenced family purchases to the tune of $500 Billion” (Campbell, 2000, p. 16). Lastly, youths have been called “consumers in training”; they are developing “brand loyalties” which may last for their entire lifetime. As one advertising executive notes, “this generation’s influence on the consumer economy is immense. Generation Y’s needs and opinions drive many adult purchase decisions, and they, literally, represent the future market for most consumer brands” (Greenspan, 2003). This “brand loyalty” may extend beyond mere preference or style, to include life-long addiction to tobacco, cola, and other physical substances. While corporations might describe their relations with schools as ‘partnerships,’ and might emphasize the advantages schools reap, they are motivated only by profit. This is not corporate benevolence: firstly, the cost of school advertising is factored into the price of the consumer product; it is we who pay for it. Secondly, corporate involvement in education is done only if they expect to make more money than they give to schools. Unlike education and educators, advertisers do not work towards a better future for society. Furthermore, corporations will prevent any opposition or criticism within schools, which principals and administrators are required to enforce or risk losing their funding.2

As Henry Giroux states, corporations “substitute corporate propaganda for real learning, upset the requisite balance between the public and the private, and in doing so treat schools like any other business” (Giroux, 2000, p. 173). This reinforces students’ role as consumers, spectators, and passive citizens. Consumerism thereby erodes democratic life, reduces education to the reproduction of private accumulation, prevents social resistance from expressing itself as anything other than political apathy, and transforms all human relations into commercial transactions of calculated exchange. Yet education must be preserved as the location for the development of

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the reflective capacity to critique these very dominant social practices, and the cultivation of civic responsibility within a vibrant public realm.

CONCLUSION: POLITICAL ACTION AND NATALITY

The discussion of Baudrillard ended with a consideration of the possibility of resisting consumer society, a possibility which points towards a fundamental difference between Arendt and Baudrillard. Just as Arendt’s account of the ascent of the oikos and agora to a place of political dominance entailed the loss of reality and worldly alienation, so too in Baudrillard does the proliferation of signs entail the loss of reality. However, in contrast to the ‘totalitarian’ character of consumer society as presented by Baudrillard, which is able to absorb any form of resistance, Arendt emphasizes the possibilities which action and natality can provide. In spite of the political dominance of the oikos and agora, she still holds that action remains within our grasp: “needless to say, this does not mean that modern man has lost his capacities or is on the point of losing them...the capacity for action...is still with us” (Arendt, 1958, p. 323). This is so because it is through action and speech that we bring newness into the world, and express the human capacity to begin. Arendt links action with natality, the “new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity for beginning something anew, that is, of acting” (Arendt, 1958, p. 9). Because we are each newcomers to the world, able to begin something unexpected and unprecedented, the ‘totalitarian’ character of the code of consumption can be resisted. Arendt’s account of natality points towards the resilience of the human spirit: the young are a constant source of the new, through which the world is preserved from decay and decline. And yet, as Henry Giroux states, “growing up corporate has become a way of life for American youth...it is apparent in the accelerated commercialism in all aspects of everyday life, including the commercialization of public schools” (Giroux, 2000, p. 170). The profound importance of education becomes apparent: if this well-spring of beginnings is eroded and absorbed into the endless cycle of production and consumption it is our polis, and reality itself, which we stand to lose.

Through consumption we attempt to differentiate ourselves from others and assert our identity, to mark ourselves as different and
unique. Secondly, we attempt to insert ourselves into the world of human relations, to participate in our social world, and to experience ourselves as part of a larger whole. Arendt and Baudrillard reveal how these are both illusory. Through symbolization and signification, humans have always and will always endow objects with attributes that are of our own making. What is unique about consumer society is that this activity is appropriated by commercial forces such that instead of seeing the world around us we see only the signs of consumption. Yet through preserving the sphere of education as a location for action, speech, and natality, we may yet bring health to our “feverish city.”

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