TOWARD A RECONCEPTUALIZATION AND REVITALIZATION OF CONSUMER EDUCATION

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Toward a Reconceptualization and Revitalization of Consumer Education

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In this dissertation I defend the thesis that consumer education should be an essential component of public education on the basis of civic, economic, and environmental ethical frameworks. The first task of the dissertation is to define what is meant by the concept of consumer education in the context of the American educational system. I use a historical analysis to trace the manifestations of consumer education in practice over time by examining, for example, changing curricular emphasis and intended student audiences. The second task of the dissertation is to examine existing civic, economic, and environmental normative arguments for why consumer education is important for the public good and is justified for inclusion in some form in the public school curriculum. The third task of the dissertation is to reimagine a relevant consumer education for 21st century and develop pragmatic suggestions for how public schools might educate conscientious consumer citizens.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER  WHAT IS CONSUMER EDUCATION AND WHERE DID IT GO?

“The western wall is a jumbo screen
At the gate, there is an automated teller machine
‘Sir, empty your pockets, please,
Before you file through’
The king and queen foreclosed on their crowns
While the joker laughed and made his rounds
He was drunk, carrying on self-satisfied.

The western walls are closing in
Are you happy, sane, are you rich, are you thin?
Dreaming their dreams, singing songs of another time.
Is your gold so strangely acquired?
Has your name become known and desired?
Have you degenerated? Are you running out of time?
Do you want nice things? Sure you do.”

Introduction

In 2013, a TIME magazine article cited a national public opinion poll indicating that 99 percent of American adults believe schools should teach personal finance, yet lamented that only 13 states offer some form of personal finance course. The article provides a number of reasons why schools do not teach personal finance, which incidentally are supported by the research literature: teachers feel unqualified to teach such a course, personal finance does not appear in


standardized tests, discrepancies in state mandates and suggested curriculum, and disagreement amongst educators about what type of personal finance instruction works. The result across the nation is a hodgepodge of public and private extracurricular efforts to provide consumers the resources and skills they need to manage their money which lack a systematic oversight, evaluation, or grounding in educational theory.

Simultaneously, an ever-growing advertising industry seeks to negate wise spending with an information overload of its own. In the United States, companies spend over $200 billion annually on advertising and it is estimated that children view an average of 25,600 ads a year, all of it designed to increase consumer demand. Despite the existence of consumer education and financial literacy programs offered by some corporations and non-profit organizations, which rely on the personal motivation of consumers to participate, the only systematic consumer education the average consumer receives is in the form of advertising.

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Following the global economic crisis of 2008, the nation’s attention focused on the glaring lack of consumer education when it became apparent that producers and consumers alike acted irrationally in the marketplace. Policy makers from disparate sectors cited nationwide studies showing the majority of college students got a ‘D’ or ‘F’ on a financial literacy test, and that of youth 15-18 years old, just 4.7% scored 90% or higher on their financial knowledge test, and 62% scored below 69.9% on the test. Naturally, calls to improve financial education in schools have increased as a result. Yet, in all the discussion, there seems to be no historical context and financial literacy as presented bears no connection with a broader consumer consciousness or educational philosophy.

It is hardly the first time in American history that people have demanded for financial literacy or consumer education. Public schools seem like a natural place to help systematically develop the capacities necessary for citizens to successfully participate in a capitalist economy, yet consumer education and financial literacy have had only a minor, and sometimes non-existent, place in the curriculum. My use of multiple terms, consumer education and financial literacy, is not intended to be redundant. One of the main signifiers that schools have failed to

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12 See Perkinson, Henry. The Imperfect Panacea. (McGraw-Hill. 4th Edition, 1995), which demonstrates the conviction Americans have that public schools can solve complex social and economic problems.
cohesively and systematically prepare educated consumers is the lack of a straightforward nomenclature and common approach. Hira, in a brief history of the academic study of personal finance writes,

Long before any specialty, emphasis, or a degree program in personal finance was formally offered across the nation, concepts closely related to personal finance were taught, and continue to be taught, under names such as family economics, consumer economics, consumption economics, family economics and resource management, household finances, family finances, and family financial management.¹³

At the primary and secondary school levels, it has been even more difficult to distinguish where and how topics of personal budgeting, personal finance, and consumer education have been taught because, if covered at all, it has been under the umbrella of other defined subjects such as social studies, health, or math and not as an independent unit of study.

Historically, the most common place in public schools to receive some form of consumer education was in home economics courses and programs. These programs assumed that men worked outside of the home as producers and women inside the home as consumers.¹⁴ As such, females had the responsibility of spending their husband’s money wisely. Following the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, home economics changed its emphasis from preparing homemakers to preparing all types of students to face the challenges of living and working in a consumer society.¹⁵ This shift was reflected in the 1994 name change of the

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¹⁴ For a thorough discussion of how the producer/consumer, public/private dichotomy between males and females has played out in educational spheres see Martin, Jane Roland. *Changing the Educational Landscape: Philosophy, Women, and Curriculum.* (Psychology Press, 1994).

American Home Economics Association (AHEA) to the American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences (AAFCS). Even with the inclusion of both genders, however, the subject matter was still grounded in a type of consumer education related to the home, and not placed in the context of other microeconomics. For example, the personal finance skills taught in home economics remained focused on budgeting and shopping and generally ignored consumer education related to financial products and services (like credit cards) or the effects of consumer choices on a larger economic, political, and ecological environment. Even these limited consumer education efforts offered through family and consumer sciences were narrowed and minimized in the 1980s and 1990s as the school accountability movement pushed for increased emphasis on reading, writing, math, and science in order to prepare students for a ‘competitive’ college and career environment.16

Despite calls in recent years for improved financial literacy and consumer education focused on healthy decision making in American schools, research in and exposure to, consumer education has become nearly moribund. Membership in American Home Economics Association/American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences, the primary organization which promotes research and teacher training in consumer education, declined from a peak of 50,000 members in the mid-1960s, to about 25,000 in the mid-1990s, and down to approximately 5,000 in 2012.17 The number of students enrolled in family and consumer science (FCS) courses


declined from 5.5 million students in 2002-2003 to 3.5 million students in 2011-12—a 38% reduction in less than 10 years. And among the 3.5 million students receiving some form of FCS coursework, there is still strong gender differentiation with a 35% to 65% male to female ratio.

Purpose

Consumer education in the United States needs attention, both to bring clarity to its scope and to articulate the normative grounds for why it is important. Accordingly, the purpose of my dissertation is to examine the historical place of consumer education in United States public education as well as the ethical rationales for educating consumers. As Durkheim, and later Dewey, noted, education is a process of both intentional and unintentional reproduction where the young are socialized to adapt the physical, intellectual, and moral dispositions required to participate in the larger society. The common school was developed in the United States to achieve many of these goals, not the least of which, was market participation as both a future worker and future consumer. As such, intentional development of curricula that included


19 Werhan, 42; Please note that 3.5 million students enrolled in FCS courses in 2011 represented approximately 6% of the 54.8 million students enrolled in K-12 schools that year

20 Durkheim, É. Education and Sociology. (Free Press, 1956).


22 Bowles, Samuel, and Herbert Gintis. Schooling in Capitalist America. (New York: Basic Books, 1976) make this case exceedingly well, though they note the emphasis of schooling has to been to socialize and prepare a workforce and place less emphasis on the consumer goals. This will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter II.
consumer education components sheds light onto its perceived importance by the larger society. As will be explored in this study, some groups of students have historically had disparate exposure to consumer education on the basis of their race, gender, or class reflecting economic and social hierarchies. Contemporarily, as consumer education wanes in public school curricula, there is a need to assess what its function might be and more importantly why it is needed in the 21st century.

The neglect of consumer education in contemporary American public school curricula comes at a tremendous personal cost to students, as well as their current and future families. Consumer education has the potential to improve one’s personal finances, health, and wellbeing. The skills it promotes such as research, discernment, and buyer savvy can help protect individuals from unscrupulous businesses and dangerous products while providing a sense of empowerment. There is also a political cost to poor consumer education. Without a familiarity with the policies or agencies that govern the economic marketplace and the mechanisms for influencing such policies, consumers are left to believe there is no recourse for influencing the business world. As will be discussed further in this study, historically, improvements to the quality of consumer products, the working conditions for those who make consumer products, and reduction in negative environmental impacts have often resulted from organized consumer movements.

My interest in consumer education is driven by an existential concern for humanity’s relationship with the biosphere. This concern comes not only from the well-publicized warnings regarding climate change, but the current and immediate impact “productive” economic activities (and the consumer demand that drives them) have on the wellbeing of millions of people every
day. A recent global study revealed the significance of environmental pollution relative to other public health concerns,

    Even the conservative estimate of 9 million pollution-related deaths is one-and-a-half times higher than the number of people killed by smoking, three times the number killed by AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined, more than six times the number killed in road accidents, and 15 times the number killed in war or other forms of violence.\textsuperscript{23}

And as if the lives of the 9 million people weren’t motivating enough, the same report also found that global pollution comes with a $4.6 trillion a year economic cost.\textsuperscript{24} Ultimately, all human activity builds upon the consumption of natural resources and energy, whether it be the transformation of raw materials into complex machines or nutrients and water into livestock and produce. Companies and consumers predicate production and purchasing decisions related to resources on the types of knowledge and moral frameworks available to them. These capacities must be consciously and deliberately developed and suggest a need to reinvigorate consumer education in the American public school curriculum. Yet, consumer education is declining.

    The goal of this study is to bring clarity to the topic of consumer education in a broad and holistic manner by examining its past and current features, carefully examining the ethical rationales for its importance in a healthy society, and finally to reimagine a relevant consumer education for 21\textsuperscript{st} century and develop pragmatic suggestions for how public schools might educate conscientious consumer citizens. Below I identify my central research questions, lay


\textsuperscript{24} Daigle, 2017.
the conceptual groundwork for the study, and provide a description for my methods and content of analysis.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study, and the research questions, are designed to bring consumer education into central focus in the curriculums of our educational institutions. Stated explicitly:

**Thesis:** On the basis of civic, economic, and environmental ethical frameworks, consumer education should be an essential component of public education.

**Research Question 1:** What are the normative grounds for increasing and improving consumer education in public schools?

**Research Question 2:** What might a consumer education curriculum look like that integrates and balances civic, economic, and ecological values?

**Conceptual Framework**

This dissertation seeks to examine notions of consumption in ‘competing’ spheres of human life in an attempt to cut through the abstractions and explore what normative principles are being applied in our society’s thinking on the subject of consumer education. As such, it will necessarily challenge traditional distinctions between the notions of private and public interests and between productive and consumptive activities. In the introduction to *Experience and Education*, Dewey notes that humans tend to frame philosophies of education, and more general social theories, in oppositional positions so that one must choose “either-or.” In analyzing these oppositional views Dewey writes, “It is the business of an intelligent theory of education to ascertain the causes for the conflicts that exist [among competing theoretical claims] and then, instead of taking one side or the other, to indicate a plan of operations proceeding from a level

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deeper and more inclusive than is represented by the practices and ideas of the contending parties.”

The dichotomy between humans and the environment is one such conflict and is manifest in a series of entrenched “either-or” positions, for example: use and development vs. conservation, climate change denial vs. renewable investment, human consumption vs. animal rights, etc. Similarly, economic and civic interests are portrayed as having competing priorities, for example: corporate hierarchies vs. equitable participation, free markets vs. fair trade, urban redevelopment vs. gentrification. Dewey advised, “Now, all principles by themselves are abstract. They become concrete only in the consequences, which result from their application.”

Below, I outline five trends of modern scholarship and thought, ecological interdependence, neoliberalism, critical scholarship on consumerism, environmental education, and applied ethics, which have influenced my thought and provide some conceptual guideposts to this study. I conclude by drawing on the pragmatic tradition which, as Dewey prescribes, suggests a synthetic and interdisciplinary approach.

Ecological Interdependence

Humans exist within a complex and interconnected ecosystem and we depend upon innumerable other species of plants, animals, and microorganisms for survival. Our actions continually influence and transform the natural world. In the modern era, through unparalleled population growth, technological improvement, and carbon emissions, no area of the planet is free from the effects of human activity. For this reason, the current geologic era has been

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26 Dewey, Experience and Education.

27 Dewey, Experience and Education, 7.

deemed the “Anthropocene,” meaning human epoch.\textsuperscript{29} Similarly, despite our best attempts at the creation of ‘synthetic’ materials, genetically modified organisms, and widespread modification of our surrounding landscapes –there is no human nor human activity that can exist completely divorced from the natural world. If the competing distinctions between humans and nature are abstractions that gain meaning only in how they frame our discussions and affect the actions we take, addressing problems of environmental degradation requires a more complete understanding of our current relationship with the natural world as consumers of energy and resources.

The problem of environmental degradation, and humankind’s relationship to the environment, are extremely difficult to take head on. Environmental harm is often the consequence and not the direct aim of human activity. As such, environmental issues and education are undertheorized in the field of educational philosophy. According to Kato, the discipline struggles to deal with environmental problems because they are trans-generational and trans-national, and the foundational assumption upon which philosophical thought has developed, that humans are subject to the whims of nature rather than vice versa, creates too muddled a subject to study.\textsuperscript{30} Analytic philosophy especially, with its tradition of careful categorization and definition, is ill equipped to handle environmental problems which are inherently influenced by all of the innumerable actions within the biosphere. Any educational


philosophy which seeks relevance in the 21st century and beyond must incorporate ecological concerns into its core.

Neoliberalism and the Decline of Public Institutions and Collective Action

In addition to the difficulties of thinking holistically about the environment, is the problem of taking coordinated human action to curb or address the negative consequences of private human activities. Many scholars, political theorists, and writers have noted in recent decades that private and economic interests have supplanted public interests in nearly every aspect of our public institutions, and thus grossly undercut the possibilities for constructive collective action. The changes in values and functionality of government are argued to be the product of a larger socio-economic trend, referred to as neoliberalism, where governments and individuals place themselves in competition with one another to appease corporate interests. The term “neoliberalism” was initially developed in economic circles, where it described a small group of German economists, but since the 1980s, critical theorists and Marxist scholars have adopted the term to denote free market fundamentalism and a reduction of government provided services. Neoliberalism was embodied by conservative movements in the U.S. and U.K., where Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher challenged labor movements, withdrew social services, withdrew environmental protections, and established aggressive anti-inflation monetary policies. In recent decades, many have argued that neoliberalism is the guiding ideology of

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both major political parties in the United States, as evidenced by the free trade agreements advocated by Presidents Bill Clinton and later Barrack Obama and by the dismantling of the welfare system under Bill Clinton.\textsuperscript{34} Key features of neoliberal policy are the privatization of previously public services, the application of business standards to the remaining public services, and de-regulation by the government of economic activities.\textsuperscript{35} Some of the value propositions and assumptions underlying neoliberal policy are that 1) competition improves service, 2) individuals are more productive when there are incentives and accountability measures, 3) top-down management is the most efficient method for organizational management,\textsuperscript{36} and 4) government regulations are inherently flawed and inefficient.\textsuperscript{37}

The application of neoliberal policy on public institutions, and in particular the field of public education, has been an emphasis on competition and marketization by tying funding decisions to “objective” measurable outputs (i.e., tests and career placement), emphasizing top-down management of teachers and faculty, and promoting the use of charter schools as a means to free education from democratic control. As a result, the purpose and structure of the American education system is fundamentally changing. Despite strong arguments about the


benefits of a highly educated citizenry in increasing civic engagement, raising tax revenues, and improving the knowledge and talent pool of a population;\textsuperscript{38} local, state, and national governments have largely divested from the funding of higher education in the past three decades and there has been a sharp rise in the creation of “privatized” K-12 schools (i.e., schools that operate using tax payer dollars but directed by non-elected school boards). Divestment of public funds from the educational system has followed a perception that education is a commodity used for personal advancement. While there is certainly overwhelming public concern about the rising cost of college education or access at the K-12 level to “elite” public or charter schools, the concern is framed around the ability of students and parents to consume a good and the career outcomes it will produce,\textsuperscript{39} correlating strongly to belief that education serves a private and not a public benefit.\textsuperscript{40} In this neoliberal educational environment, it is difficult for educational institutions to prioritize organizational and curricular decisions which put public goods before private ones.

\textit{Critical Education Research and Consumerism}

Many people in the field of education have put forth a vision for education that competes with the market vision, leaning on classical democratic motivations such as the need to foster


engaged citizenship, to develop critical thinking, and to develop enlightened leaders. In
critical educational theory, the encroachment of market ideologies, especially consumerism, into
educational spaces has been of central concern. Norris writes, “Consumerism…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 transaction of calculated exchange.” Operating under this
premise, studies such as Arthur criticize attempts at consumer education because it indoctrinates
“liberal and neoliberal subjects” whose fiscal discipline makes them responsible for their
personal financial situation and ignores the responsibility of employers, governmental policy, or
the structures of the capitalist system. In this paradigm, to be a consumer is to be a participant
in an unjust system and as such consumerism is something to be negated and resisted. Given the
above mentioned concern for our planetary fate, an anti-consumption approach seems an
appropriate stance for educators seeking to effect positive change in the world.

It is important here to distinguish between consumerism and consumer education. The
term consumerism refers to the trend in the modern era for individuals in capitalist economies to
purchase, and consume, as many goods and services as they can afford. As will be outlined in

41 See Aronowitz, S. The Knowledge Factory: Dismantling the Corporate University and
Creating True Higher Learning. (Beacon Press, 2000); Donoghue, Frank. The Last Professors:
The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities. (Fordham University Press, 2008);
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2010); Nussbaum, M.C. Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities. (Princeton
University Press, 2016).

42 Norris, Trevor. “Hannah Arendt & Jean Baudrillard: Pedagogy in the Consumer

43 Arthur, Chris. Financial Literacy Education: Neoliberalism, the Consumer and the
Citizen [in English]. Educational Futures: Rethinking Theory and Practice. (Rotterdam: Sense
the historical review of consumer education, consumerism rose to prominence during the Cold War era as the act of purchasing cheap and convenient goods was portrayed as a virtuous, and even patriotic, act. Consumerism stood in contrast to the virtue of “thrift” promoted in the 1910s and 1920s, which encouraged individuals to save rather than spend and to use skills to repair or mend broken goods, to ‘stretch’ consumables such as meat and produce, or to be self-sufficient in making one’s own products homemade. Consumer education taught in schools evolved to allow for the teaching of both thrifty and consumerist methods of domestic living.

When critical scholars make a case against consumerism or consumer education, they are not arguing that consuming is inherently bad (though it can seem that way). For example the above mentioned critic of consumerism, Norris, writes, “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.”

Part of the difficulty in this study of consumer education is trying to make distinctions between certain types of consumer education and behaviors, where one does not need to reject consumption in all its forms but instead learn how to thoughtfully consume.

Environmental Education

To their credit, scholars of critical education research have made bold efforts to bring political and economic trends to bear on the current state of education. Examples of such studies include: Giroux 2003, Baltodano 2013, or Hursh 2007. They have also explored topics of

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44 Norris, 460.

environmentalism and sustainability in education, for instance Bowers 1997 and 2001, as well as McGregor 2005.\textsuperscript{46} Mueller, an environmental philosopher, makes an eloquent observations about the need to integrate environmental considerations into a more democratic sociocultural context,

As ecologists and policymakers have worked together to evaluate ecological forecasting, ecological vulnerabilities and intended outcomes, they have discovered that multiple knowledge and skills, beliefs and values, personal expectations and narratives ought to be consulted to make choices about ecological tradeoffs that result in any given number of consequences.\textsuperscript{47}

He goes on to argue that while science is essential for understanding the nature of the current ecological crisis, we must strive to not disassociate this understanding from cultural context and understandings or we run the risk of undervaluing marginalized groups and incorporate a diverse range of people into the environmental movement.

As will be extensively reviewed in Chapter VI, environmental philosophers and educators have conflicting views as to what foundational theories should undergird the environmental movement. For example, Jickling argued that the prevalent approach to “environmental” or “sustainable” education is primarily instrumental and anthropocentric in character, meaning that

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it seeks to promote “wise use” practices without any consideration of deeper philosophical questions when and when not to use resources and the relationship between humanity and the environment. More recently, thinkers like Kopnina agree that environmental education is too anthropocentric, but argues that pluralistic deliberation on the issue is too slow and susceptible to neoliberal co-opting and instead posits that an instrumental approach is essential given the urgency of the ecological crisis. Adding to this conflict is a pronounced conflation between “sustainable development” policies which tend to be economic in orientation, and classic “environmental education” which emphasizes conservation and a reduction in consumption.

At the institutional level, critical scholars and environmentalists have criticized educational institutions for promoting “sustainability” under the guise of a larger neoliberal agenda. For example, Jones argues that environmental imperatives have led universities to establish top-down behavioral mandates and measures regarding sustainability as a self-serving means of demonstrating “progress” to the larger public. Absent from such measures are democratic deliberation on the nature of the problems and inclusive strategies to embed them in

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academic culture. Henderson et al. outline how a superficial commitment to sustainability can develop a “responsive and altruistic” institutional image for prospective students and potential donors, thereby increasing revenues and public perception simultaneously.\(^\text{52}\) Like businesses, colleges and universities can turn environmentalism into a public relations and marketing function, emphasizing the image of the organization without actually adopting meaningful philosophy or practices.

*The Ethical Responsibilities of Consumers*

At the individual level, there is a question as to whether consumers have ethical responsibilities in the marketplace. In the field of applied ethics there are three reoccurring arguments that relate to consumer ethics in the marketplace which seem to shift responsibility away from the consumer. First, producers have near complete knowledge and authority about how their products are made (where the materials were sourced, the relative risks of the product, the labor and manufacturing processes used to make the product, etc.) whereas consumers typically have incomplete information about these inputs and outputs. Intuitively, this seems to place moral responsibility on the producer for the means by which goods or services are produced, and the consequences of that production on others. Indeed, this is the reason much of the blame for environmental destruction, worker exploitation, and other unsavory practices is directed at corporations and business enterprises and the large body of literature on corporate social responsibility seeks to improve accountability in these areas. Second, others argue that a producer’s sole responsibility is to make a profit and it is the responsibility of government to

establish the parameters and set policies by which business should operate and the public interest can be promoted.\textsuperscript{53} Thirdly, some research shows that given the complexity of modern supply chains, sourcing processes, manufacturing technologies, and the overwhelming amount of information a person would have to process to understand them, it is increasingly difficult for the average consumer to remain fully informed about the goods he or she purchases in the marketplace.\textsuperscript{54} Taken together, these three positions seem to absolve consumer from the responsibility the production of the goods they consume.

Without disputing that producers and governments bear responsibility for mitigating the negative consequences of production, or the difficulty for consumers to gain accurate knowledge about the full lifecycle of a good, this thesis will assert that consumers have a moral responsibility to research their consumer decisions, expend resources to acquire responsibly produced goods to the extent that it does not cause harm to one’s wellbeing (i.e. a person living in poverty cannot be expected to exert the same effort or money as a more affluent person), and exert political pressure on companies and governments to uphold moral standards. These moral arguments are explained and outlined in detail by Peacock, who assumes, as a given, that producers will act in unethical and short-sighted ways in order to maximize profit unless


otherwise pressured or incentivized, and argues that consumers cannot be forgiven for overlooking such practices.\footnote{Peacock, Mark. "Market Processes and the Ethics of Consumption." \textit{SAGE Open} 5, no. 2. (2015).}

Peacock provides two useful metaphors for consideration: 1) a CEO who tells her staff to increase profits but to not inform her of the means by which they do so and 2) a university administrator who declines to investigate an allegation of sexual harassment because he believes the accused party could not possibly be guilty.\footnote{Peacock, 4-5.} In both situations, we would not say that the ignorance of the respective leaders disqualifies them from a level of guilt if fraudulent accounting practices were found to have taken place or there was truth to the harassment accusation. Analogously, as consumers we are implicated in collective guilt if we direct producers to give us the lowest cost goods at “any means necessary” or refuse to acknowledge the distinct possibility that practices such as toxic dumping or child labor were used to make our goods even if we are only vaguely aware through news stories that these things occur.

Affirmatively responding to the question of whether consumers have ethical responsibilities, is a growing body of research seeking to articulate the nature of consumer ethics. Muncy and Vitell define consumer ethics as “the moral principles and standards that guide the behaviors of individuals as they obtain, use, and dispose of goods and services.”\footnote{Vitell, Scott J., and James Muncy. "Consumer ethics: An empirical investigation of factors influencing ethical judgments of the final consumer." \textit{Journal of Business Ethics} 11, no. 8 (1992): 585-597.} Vitell elaborates on the dimensions of these relationships

First, toward other stakeholders, in their one-on-one dyadic relationships they have a responsibility to act ethically which usually involves the obtaining and perhaps use of goods and services, but could also involve disposal. We might call this responsibility,
consumer ethics. Second, toward society as a whole consumers have a responsibility to avoid societal harm and even to act proactively for social benefit which may involve all three facets of consumer behavior—obtaining, use and disposal. We might call this responsibility, CnSR [consumer social responsibility].

Vitell makes a distinction between individual actions that avoid harm within a values or legal framework and actions which go beyond non-harm to improve social and environmental conditions which is analogous to the business ethics hierarchy which distinguishes between ethical obligations (having a compulsive quality) and ethical responsibilities (having a voluntary quality). For example, a consumer might have an ethical obligation not to buy goods the consumer knows to be stolen, but an ethical responsibility to research where the goods came from. It will be necessary in later chapters to address the complicated question of how to educate individuals to understand and act on the obligations and responsibilities as a modern consumer.

**A Pragmatic Approach**

It is within this context of anthropocentric and neoliberal paradigms where public educational institutions have focused on individualism and careerism, that a consumer education attuned to broader social, economic, and environmental concerns has withered and is need of revival. In contrast to traditional philosophical approaches which have difficulty categorizing environmental problems, economic approaches which treat environmental problems as externalities, I propose approaching the question of an environmentally conscious consumer education from a more pragmatic perspective. Recently, philosophers of education, grounded in

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the pragmatic tradition, such as Giarelli and Burbules and Abowitz, have argued for an inversion in philosophical thinking that is embedded in the educational process.

Moral philosophy cannot be simply an examination of what it is right or wrong to do, without asking whether and how it is possible to foster the development of people who will think and act that way. Epistemology cannot be simply the examination of truth conditions or criteria of warrant, understood entirely apart from considerations of how people learn to interpret and apply those standards. Critical thinking is not just a set of analytical skills and tools, but also a set of emotional conditions and dispositions toward enacting them.

In such a paradigm, the appropriate response to the challenges of our world is a mode of thinking that values context, is reflective, prioritizes dissemination, and is concerned with the consequences of communicating and learning.

Educating to respond to an existential threat and educating for a certain type of character and intellectual disposition are inexorably intertwined. It requires a philosophy that is both a type of practice and driven by practice, committed to a sense of purpose and progress. Giarelli writes, “Educational theory in this view—though drawing from psychologies of individual development, moral and social philosophy, the history of ideas, and sociologies of educational environments—is rooted in an analysis of conduct as it is displayed in social practices and informed by practical judgment.” The type of educational response that I would like to propose follows Giarelli’s suggestion by merging disparate, but complementary, theoretical perspectives

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61 Burbules and Abowitz, 273.

to inform a holistic type of research aimed at understanding and influencing everyday consumptive practices.

**Method and Content of Analysis**

The first section of this study will explore what is meant by consumer education, why it has been offered, and how it has changed over time. This historical analysis examines the rise of schools generally and the teaching of consumer sciences within them, tracing changing curricular emphasis, student demographics, and specifically how the notions of who produces and who consumes were defined. I pay particular attention to the way in which consumer education reflected political, economic, and social concerns of a given era and how these public concerns often become reflected in consumer education curricula.

After establishing what consumer education has been and its place in a larger economic and political context, the second task of this study will be to examine why, if at all, public schools should teach consumer education to students. The key word, “should,” is representative of a normative position. Normative ethics have to do with the study of correct action – given a set of information about problem or dilemma, what ought rationale actors do. The long-standing dilemma in the study of ethics is that there is no one singular framework to think ethically. 63 Depending on the values, methods, and points of analysis a person focuses on, she or he might arrive at an entirely different conclusion than another person when both utilize perfectly ‘rational’ or ‘coherent’ logic. Conversely, two different people might arrive at the same conclusion for a course of action to take by using two entirely different rationales. My goal is to examine several sets of rationales and ethical frameworks individuals with an interest in public

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education might use to evaluate the merit of consumer education. My analysis suggests there are
three primary frameworks employed in educational research and policy spheres to make
arguments for or against consumer education; they are what I will refer to as the civic, the
economic, and environmental frames.

I will briefly describe the key features of the civic, economic, and environmental frames
below. Note that here I am simply introducing the general nature of the normative arguments,
omitting at this juncture a more specific discussion of authors or bodies of work that typify the
arguments. Thorough analysis of this literature will occur in the main body of the dissertation
and will attempt to bring to light any disconfirming or notable exceptions to the main assertions
of the arguments being presented here.

In Chapter 3, I establish a civic framework for the inclusion of consumer education in in
school curriculum. Using John Dewey’s notion of public formation in democratic societies as
foundation, I examine how various publics, public institutions, and governmental bodies interact
to represent the wills of coordinated individuals and groups. Using the most salient feature of
Dewey’s thesis regarding publics, that the strength of a public grows when it becomes aware of
itself and its capacity to shape the actions of others, I look to his suggestions for how the
educational process can develop the dispositions and skills needed to participate in these public
formations. Using this framework, I argue that a significant modern consumer problem, that of
digital misinformation and the inability of citizens to critically evaluate sources, necessitates a
broader vision of civic education, one which views consumption as central to the democratic
experience.

In Chapter 4, I ground the economic normative argument for consumer education on a
fundamental principle of classic economic theory called efficiency. An underlying assumption
of capitalist economics is that free markets maximize positive outcomes for the greatest number of people through voluntary choices and exchanges (this assumption will be further examined in the body of the dissertation). Economists would call a market efficient when resources are optimally allocated to serve each individual or entity while minimizing waste, at prices which provide the lowest possible cost to both the producer and consumer. A necessary condition for an efficient market would be for producers to have quality information regarding the wants and needs of consumers, and for consumers to both 1) have quality information regarding goods and services available to them 2) make rational decision based on that information. For a person who subscribes to classical economic theory, whom I will refer to as a market rationalist, maximizing the efficiency of the marketplace will maximize positive outcomes for society. While a market can never be perfectly efficient, a market rationalist seeking to improve efficiency would necessarily believe consumers should have a mechanism for gathering information about goods and services and evaluating when and why to make a purchase. Further, market rationalists typically denigrate the role of government as an effective actor in improving efficiency and in terms of public policy emphasize the importance of the ‘responsible consumers’ protecting their self-interest and directing the will of the marketplace. While I will

64 See Wright, John. The Ethics of Economic Rationalism. (Sydney, Australia: UNSW Press, 2003) for a detailed analysis of this claim.

65 Wright, 5-6.


not attempt to debate the validity of this statement, I will point out that responsibility placed on consumers by market rationalists implies support for some form of consumer education.

While the effect of consumption on the environment certainly stands as a public good that would fall under the civic normative frame, in Chapter 5, I name a distinct environmental normative argument for consumer education because of its unique call for a holistic form of consumer education. The environmental framework for improving consumer education calls for developing in individuals the capacity to understand their complex relationship with the natural environment and to raise consciousness regarding the consequences of economic activities. Unique to the environmental paradigm is the emphasis that all human activity, whether called economically productive or consumptive, requires consumption of energy and natural resources derived from the environment. Additionally, there is a major segment within the environmental ethics and environmental education movements which advocates for moving away from an anthropocentric perspective to assign inherent value or worth to other species of organisms, implying a re-orientation away from the self-interest advocated in the economic paradigm and toward a more symbiotic relationship with the environment.

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example of the environmental argument for consumer education was Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* which brought widespread awareness to the consequences of suburbanization.\textsuperscript{72}

The goal of my study is to demonstrate that despite contradictory values and goals for public education amongst the civic, economic, and environmental frames, all three frameworks lead to the conclusion that public schools should include consumer education as part of the curriculum. There are two significant limitations to note about this proposal. The first is that many of the thinkers I will reference representing the civic, economic, and environmental are not necessarily educational theorists or researchers.\textsuperscript{73} As such, the primary thrusts of their arguments do not center around the typical concerns of schooling and the associated debates regarding place in the curriculum and the type of pedagogy to be utilized. This leads to the second limitation. Some of the thinkers I will mention, in particular the market rationalists, simply make a case for consumer education’s value and would not necessarily agree the best place for that education is public schools.\textsuperscript{74} This is a challenge for my thesis, but one that I believe, by being cognizant of, will ultimately strengthen my case.

\textsuperscript{72} Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring.* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002)

\textsuperscript{73} This limitation applies primarily to the economic and environmental frames, whose bodies of literature do not explicitly relate to the educative process or schooling and are only beginning to develop as focused areas of education research. For example, from the economic perspective Rothschild, Kurt W. "Ethics and Economic Theory." (Edward Elgar Publishing, 1993) or from the environmental perspective Taylor, P.W. *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics - 25th Anniversary Edition.* (Princeton University Press, 2011). The civic frame, which carries with it explicit calls for cooperative action and informed communication, is necessarily educative and has an extensive body of literature in education research which will be discussed in the body of this study.

\textsuperscript{74} For examples see Dynarski, Susan. “Free Market for Education? Economists Generally Don’t Buy It.” *New York Times*, December 30, 2016. Last accessed June 1, 2018 at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/30/upshot/free-market-for-education-economists-generally-dont-buy-it.html; or the Walton Foundation giving $2 million to support financial literacy in schools while at the same time advancing a school privatization effort Rojc, Philip “From the Walton Family Foundation, a Big Give for Financial Literacy Education.” *Inside Philanthropy,*
The third task of the dissertation is to develop a philosophical grounding for a type of consumer education, which would be most beneficial to individuals, society, and the planet. The objective of this analysis is to identify how individuals within our society come to an awareness of problems such as economic vulnerability and environmental degradation and how educational institutions, as connected to these public concerns, develop the capacity in young people to analyze and to act on these concerns. Stated another way, how do we help students to move from being passive consumers to what Rachels calls “a conscientious moral agent:”

The conscientious moral agent is someone who is concerned impartially with the interests of everyone affected by what he or she does; who carefully sifts facts and examines their implications; who accepts principles of conduct only after scrutinizing them to make sure they are sound.75

Such an analysis would incorporate political, philosophical, and historical lenses. I argue that the obsessive devotion of educational institutions to producing skilled workers has created a class of ignorant-and by extension vulnerable-consumers. Instead, I suggest that the ‘engaged’ institutional paradigm offers a model for schools to function as truly public institutions in the Deweyian sense and critically reflect in their role of educating consumers. I suggest a few heuristics from the fields of applied ethics and critical media literacy which can be incorporated into the curricula by engaged institutions to support opportunities for reflection and experimentation in their effort to develop discerning consumer citizens. Such an approach may allow for citizens to direct economic markets rather than for markets to subjugate citizens.


CHAPTER 2: A BRIEF HISTORY OF CONSUMER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

“If consumers are offered inferior products, if prices are exorbitant, if drugs are unsafe or worthless, if the consumer is unable to choose on an informed basis, then his dollar is wasted, his health and safety may be threatened, and the national interest suffers.” – John F. Kennedy, 1962

Introduction

To understand the current state of consumer education in the United States we must understand its past. For this study, I was particularly interested in how aspects of financial literacy and democratic empowerment were interwoven into the various manifestations of consumer education over time. To gather data, I surveyed the development of consumer education over the entire history of American public schools, beginning with secondary sources to gain a general understanding of the major trends in curriculum, pedagogy, social context, and legislation. Beginning with the period of the 1910s, when consumer education took shape as a formalized field of study, I began a more focused search for primary sources to deepen my understanding of developments in the field and followed this through the 1970s. Source materials include, but are not limited to: newspapers, governmental and institutional reports, school curriculums, educational texts, and academic research contemporary to the time period studied. My arbitrary cutoff of the 1980s is justified by a change in the national rhetoric regarding the purpose of education, when students began to be primarily identified by their role

as future workers, and secondarily identified as future citizens. Following a general framework for studying historical curricular developments, my questions for this historical review were:

1. What has been the content and form of consumer and financial education in American schools and how has it changed over time?
2. Who have been the recipients of consumer and financial education?

My findings indicate that consumer and financial education has been present in American schools for at least 150 years, but that its implementation has been limited to a minority of schools and students, the implementation has been grossly gendered, and that the personal finance curriculum offered has been inadequate. The primary detriment of the consumer education model has been the emphasis on material consumption of goods while ignoring wealth production, financial strategy, environmental considerations, and the impact of political action in economic arenas. I utilized a critical lens in this research project, paying close attention to class, gender, and race and the use and nonuse of curriculum as an expression of power. This chapter concludes by relating past trends in consumer and financial education to modern developments in the field.

**Early Consumer Education**

In the United States in the 19th century, the goal of newly created common schools was to establish a common American culture and support a developing capitalist economy. The

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educational focus in this context was instilling in children proper morals, work habits, and the basics of literacy and arithmetic necessary to participate in American society. One might imagine some of the skills needed in this society, and emphasized in school, would be the ability to make informed purchases in the market. But historical analysis of early prominent math textbooks reveals mathematics was taught using large, abstract sums with an emphasis on “drill” methods by the instructor. This indicates contextualized exercises, such as problems related to the purchase of goods and services, were unlikely.

Though early schools may not have been providing what we would call consumer education, it does not mean they were not educating for consumption. Joel Spring notes that early school houses emphasized the meaning of wealth and consumption in a moral sense as evidenced in the widely popular McGuffey readers which contained stories equating poverty to laziness and wealth to virtue. One example from the McGuffey readers is the story of Henry the Bootblack, who, suffering from poverty after his father dies, makes the right decision to return the lost pocketbook of a rich man and subsequently offers to shine the man’s shoes. In these stories respect for the property of others and respect for those who have accumulated property is conveyed.

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80 Sztajn, Mathematics Reform, 377-83.


Consumer education was similarly absent from college and university studies in the country’s early history. Typically, fields of study considered “practical,” that is outside the traditional liberal arts curriculum, were avoided. The Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890 helped to expand college programs in more practical agricultural and mechanical education, but these curriculums were intended to inform the productive sphere of the economy and not the consumptive. In the late 19th centuries and early 20th centuries progressive minded educational leaders and industrialists expanded programs of schooling for populations that had previously been shut out of educational institutions, but not necessarily in the same type of schooling that had been provided to White males. Programs for women and African Americans

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did not provide traditional liberal studies or studies in the professional fields of engineering, law, business, or medicine – but education in areas “suitable” for their role in society.

Highly publicized and respected ‘academics’ and medical professionals in the late 19th century used pseudo-science to argue that women were not physically or mentally capable of rigorous academic studies. Edward Clarke for example, gave a biological account of the many “evils which the reproductive system is apt to receive in consequence of obvious derangement” caused by diverting female energies toward education.\(^85\) The result was an attempt to develop college programs that would prepare middle and upper-class women for the proper role in society and the household. For women this included sewing, cooking, gardening, etiquette, music, and perhaps a dash of “appropriate” readings in the classics.\(^86\) Even at female seminaries of the mid and late 1800s, Roger Geiger notes, students “engaged in serious academic work, but not at the expense of other, more domestic duties.”\(^87\) Considering that household care was a priority, it necessarily meant the ability to manage the affairs of the house while the husband was engaging in more “productive” enterprises outside the home.

For African Americans, prominent industrialists and businessmen advocated “practical” education, exemplified in schools such as Hampton College and Tuskegee Institute, which included domestic service, agricultural studies, and occasional rudimentary studies in

\(^{85}\) Clarke, E.H. *Sex in Education; or, a Fair Chance for the Girls.* (James R. Osgood and Company, 1874), 94.


\(^{87}\) Geiger, Roger L. *The American College in the Nineteenth Century.* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 175.
mathematics and reading.\textsuperscript{88} Much like White females, Black students in these programs were expected to be engaged in domestic service, though typically in the context of future employment rather than as a future homemaker. The pedagogical and curricular objective for these vocational schools was achieving subordination as their goal was preparing future servants and second class citizens.\textsuperscript{89} This trend continued in the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, as White proponents of Black high schools advocated a curriculum that highlighted “household management” among other practical skills.\textsuperscript{90} This stands in stark contrast to the White high schools which were primarily concerned with preparation for college or skilled trades.\textsuperscript{91} There is obvious irony in a consumer education that teaches money management for a people living in abject poverty, and personal accountability for a people unable to hold any one else accountable through political rights.

\textbf{1900s-1920s}

The early American value of equating wealth with virtue carried strongly into the twentieth century. Several ascendant organizations of the Progressive era invested heavily in programs for directing the morality of youth. Some of these were the YMCA, the Women’s Christian Temperance Movement (WCTU), and the Boy Scouts of America. These groups,


\textsuperscript{89} Anderson, \textit{The Education of Blacks in the South}. For examples of course work that served these purposes see pages 50, 140-41, 147, and 221

\textsuperscript{90} Anderson, 209.

which engaged heavily in charity and community service, purveyed the notion that proper education in the value of work and money would prevent many of the ills of poverty the organizations worked to combat. Rallying around the virtue of “thrift,” the YMCA and Boys Scouts, and later Girl Scouts, encouraged boys and girls that squandering money on things like cigarettes and candy meant a person was deficient in character. Though, Andrew Yarrow, in his historical review of the thrift movement, is sure to note that these organizations also preached against being miserly and that thrift struck a proper balance between wise saving and contributing to the greater good of humanity.

The thrift movement found a welcome home in the growing schools the early twentieth century. Much like their common school forbearers, teachers of the Progressive Era were encouraged to frame consumer education in moral terms. When the American Bankers Association (ABA) approached educators in the 1900s and 1910s to begin opening school savings bank programs, where students were able to make small deposits to their teacher or a responsible peer in amounts of one cent to one dollar, the ABA was warmly welcomed. The Department of the Treasury created an educational series to support the savings programs called “Fifteen Lessons in Thrift” which taught “thrift brings you up the ladder, waste brings you down.” The WTCU, also advocates of the school banking movement, appointed a National

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93 Yarrow, *Thrift*.

94 Yarrow, 54-55 notes that the massive growth of the school savings program was due to its support from state and federal governments and the NEA.

95 Yarrow, 57.
Superintendent of School Savings Banks who declared the system would prevent boys “from becoming drunkards, wife beaters, and paupers.”\textsuperscript{96} The result of the pervasive support for school banks is evidenced by the number of student depositors which grew from 63,000 in 1900 to 4,200,000 in 1929, and according to the ABA, the volume of deposits increased from $335,000 to over $24,000,000.\textsuperscript{97}

The moral virtue of thrift could not be instilled without supplemental instruction in the wise use of one’s time, money, and resources, especially in a culture increasingly awash in consumer goods. Home economics education, designed to develop this exact skill set, grew in popularity as the economy transitioned from agrarianism and independent production to industrialization and market consumption. Because staple products of the home such as food and clothing could now be mass produced in factories, proper home management required an intelligent approach to budgeting wages and maximizing the utility of consumer purchases.\textsuperscript{98}

With the explosion of product advertising, the growth of department stores, and the development of consumer credit lines and insurance products in the 1910s and 1920s, household finance was not as simple as it had once been. Joel Spring notes that industrialists and business leaders of the Progressive Era who helped shape educational policy and curriculum vigorously supported financial management education as “workers would be less likely to strike if their wives could


\textsuperscript{97} Tucker, quoted in Cruce, 12.

make existing wages satisfactory through proper budgeting.\textsuperscript{99} Advocates of women’s suffrage and women’s rights also supported increased education in home economics as they believed that new technologies and mass produced goods would liberate the time of female homemakers, allowing them to become more engaged in fulfilling personal and political endeavors.\textsuperscript{100} There was an element of nativism in the promotion of home economics, however, as Spring provides evidence that early proponents of domestic science perceived the average home, especially the immigrant home, to be dirty and unsanitary and that by teaching the virtues of pre-made factory foods in educational programs they would help make America healthier.\textsuperscript{101}

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When the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 and the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 allocated federal funds for vocational education, educators frantically moved to make home economics more

\textsuperscript{99} Spring, \textit{Educating the Consumer-Citizen}, 33.

\textsuperscript{100} Spring, 35-37.

\textsuperscript{101} Spring, 35-40.
scientific and skills-oriented to capture a portion of these funds.\textsuperscript{102} The importance of the American Home Economics Association, which had been founded in 1909, grew during this period, providing the research and direction needed to standardize the curriculum. Similarly, expanding graduate schools of education at America’s colleges and Universities sought to strengthen domestic science as an area of scientific study. For example, a more “advanced” curriculum was proposed in 1928 by the Director of the Office of Research in Home Economics Education at Teachers College, Columbia University who stated,

\begin{quote}
The former classifications of foods, cookery, textiles, and clothing have been discarded for a sounder and more satisfactory grouping with reference to the \textit{professional} relationship of courses. The new divisions include: Courses on food for the family; courses on textiles and clothing; courses on housing, equipment, and management; courses on economic, social and esthetic problems of the family.\textsuperscript{103}
\end{quote}

The scientific and vocational approach to home economics de-emphasized the moral undertones of the thrift movement and instead focused on the rising consumer culture of the United States, which provided ever increasing options and technologies for the educated consumer to master.

The result of these combined efforts was a tremendous expansion of home economics and domestic science in schools. The number of college students enrolled specifically in home economics courses grew from 213 in 1905 to 17,778 in 1916.\textsuperscript{104} In high schools, enrollments swelled as well, with one report observing that by 1917 “all the progressive, larger high schools

\textsuperscript{102} Snedden, D. \textit{Sociological Determination of Objectives in Education}. J.B. (Lippincott, 1921).

\textsuperscript{103} \textit{New York Times}, “Teachers College Studies Home Life: Goal is Comprehensive Curriculum to Function in Harmony With Wishes of Students’ Parents,” December 2, 1928. Italics added for emphasis.

\textsuperscript{104} Ehrenreich, B., and D. English. \textit{For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women}. (Anchor Books, 1979), 163-165.
in the United States were offering home economics.” In American Home Economics Association annual report of 1925 a contributor argues that home economics may be more essential than the three R’s, as home economics relates to health and sustaining one’s life.

Another author, lamenting that many girls do not make it to high school, proposed expanding “the essential education” to all educational levels. Despite the growth in enrollments in home economics the 1910s and 1920s, an education focused on wise consumerism was available only to one gender, and even within that gender not necessarily available to all.

1930s-1940s

The 1930s marked a brief turning point in American consumer education. The staggering poverty and unemployment caused by the Great Depression created a new framework for understanding the consumer’s relationship to the marketplace. The collapse of the banking and financial industry virtually eliminated the school savings programs and calls for individuals to be thrifty seemed out of place when so many individuals could barely scrape by. Progressive educational researchers of the time such as George Counts encouraged skepticism of unfettered capitalism and its associated consumerism to provide the kind of social and economic improvement the nation needed.

Classroom materials responded to these concerns, with

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105 Snedden, Objectives in Education, 3.


108 Yarrow, Thrift.

authors like Harold Rugg writing textbooks that provided insights into cooperative business models, cooperative purchasing groups, and consumer protection and advocacy.\textsuperscript{110} Advocacy groups also began to form such a Consumers Union, whose now famous publication \textit{Consumers Report} launched, supplying education and warnings to the American people about dangerous and low quality products. Counts and Rugg were among a host of other writers in the 1930s who were critical of consumerism and, for a brief time, were widely read among educators and the general population.\textsuperscript{111}

The Great Depression marked “unprecedented” involvement and experimentation of the federal government in educational programs.\textsuperscript{112} Consumer education was no exception. New Deal programs to assist struggling families and communities integrated consumer education into welfare programs inside and outside of schools. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration, for example, created provisions to not only give monetary relief assistance to unemployed persons, but to provide educational opportunities for them as well. The program hired unemployed teachers to provide classes in general adult education, literacy, and vocational training, including curricular content that emphasized general welfare, health, and nutrition within the context of poverty.\textsuperscript{113}

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\textsuperscript{110} Rugg, H.O., and L. Krueger. \textit{Man and His Changing Society: Man at Work: His Art and Crafts}. (Ginn, 1938); Rugg, H.O. \textit{Citizenship and Civic Affairs}. (Ginn, 1940).

\textsuperscript{111} Spring, \textit{Educating the Consumer-Citizen}, 133.


\end{flushright}
Rising collective consumer consciousness pushed many educators and policy makers to advocate for consumer education as its own independent area of study outside of home economics by the start of the 1940s. One report that truly illuminates the extent and limits of consumer education, at least in the state of New Jersey, is the research conducted by Helen Rittersbacher in 1942.\textsuperscript{114} Rittersbacher provided data from 110 high schools, recording the incidence and type of consumer education offered, as well as the opinions from principals regarding the desirability of consumer education. She found that nearly half of school administrators deemed consumer education worthy of independence as its own subject and a large majority supported its integration into other school subjects.\textsuperscript{115} The scope of topics covered by consumer education was also broadening at this time to move beyond buying and budgeting

\textsuperscript{114} Rittersbacher, Helen Finn. \textit{A Study of Consumer Education in One Hundred Ten Secondary Schools of New Jersey}. Master’s Thesis., Rutgers University. New Brunswick, N.J, 1942.

\textsuperscript{115} Rittersbacher, 24-25.
to include other important topics on financial literacy. One *Guide for Teaching Consumer Education*, written in 1943 by members of the New Jersey Department of Public Instruction and various teachers of consumer education, provides instructional unit outlines and resource materials for fourteen areas such as: Budgeting, Consumer Credit, Advertising, Agencies that Help the Consumer, Security Through Insurance, and Cooperatives.\(^{116}\) The authors are sure to mention, “The National Education Association endorsed (in 1940) the teaching of Cooperation in our public schools as one the best methods for the ‘positive teaching of democracy.’”\(^{117}\)

Despite this enthusiasm for a broader form of consumer education in some policy circles and schools, Rittersbacher notes 25% of schools offered no form of consumer education even as an integrated unit,\(^{118}\) and for schools offering consumer education it was limited to upper classes, with only 17% of high school freshman receiving exposure to consumer education, but 59.7% of high school seniors being exposed.\(^{119}\) The report found that consumer education commonly fell under already established classes such as home economics, social studies, and problems in American democracy, but in a manner that was inconsistent and left gaps on important topics. Rittersbacher speculated that consumer education lacked a distinct space because “there was no teacher available to teach such as course, that community opinion may not be favorable, or that too-crowded curriculum did not permit the inclusion.”\(^{120}\)

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\(^{118}\) Rittersbacher, A Study of Consumer Education, 34.

\(^{119}\) Rittersbacher, 30.

\(^{120}\) Rittersbacher, 26.
Egalitarian educational and welfare programs of the Federal Government, along with the proponents of consumer education, were not without detractors. The Advertising Federation of America (AFA), whose interest in maintaining a gullible public is obvious, and groups such as the American Legion, who were seeking to root out any perspective they deemed un-American, actively fought any curriculum that didn’t promote unregulated, free-market capitalism.

Through the efforts led by the AFA and the American Legion, Counts and Rugg were declared communists regardless of their actual political and economic ideologies, and Consumers Union was named a “subversive organization” by the House on Un-American Activities Committee.121 The wartime threat of foreign ideologies gave conservative groups license to quash any attempts of consumer education that fell outside an individualized, pro-consumption framework; a theme that would continue well into the Cold War.

In the 1940s, many females assumed “productive” roles in wartime jobs in factories and businesses, but the educational sector still stressed the importance of traditional domestic science instruction. On founding a whole academic division on “Domestic Life” in 1942, the president of Stephens College in Missouri acknowledged that many women were now wage earners, but that “Educators often seem to forget that students marry, live in home and have children, and that for most women homemaking and motherhood become the equivalent of professional pursuits. It's put homemaking education on the same level as education in science, social studies, the arts, vocations or any other traditional area.”122 The belief that home economics should be required by all women echoes the sentiments of the American Home Economics Association in the 1920s,

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121 Spring, Educating the Consumer-Citizen, 130-136.

including the worry that without such education, women would be negatively impacted. These concerns did not seem to be promoting enrollment in home economics, however, as one 1953 advocate estimated that only 25% of females received home economics instruction.¹²³

**1950s-1960s**

Following the consumer conscious trend of the 1940s, the scope of the financial education in the 1950s curriculum began to expand to cover topics that had previously been outside a women’s purview. In a popular 1949 educational booklet entitled *Women and Their Money* for example, the author cites the growing number of women who are heads of households to advocate that girls and women be taught previously neglected areas of personal finance such as insurance, credit and loans, and wise investing strategies.¹²⁴ A *New York Times* article a few years later reflected similar sentiments,

> The trend toward feminine control of family expenditures will manifest itself in the Barnard College curriculum next fall with the introduction of an economics department course in ‘Personal Finance.’ The course will consider installment buying and other credit problems, insurance, annuities, Social Security, investment for security and income, and the effects of taxation and inflation on a personal budget.¹²⁵

The skills and knowledge required for mastery of these financial areas went beyond the scope of simple shopping and savings instruction in decades prior (though it is important to note this in-depth personal finance instruction was taking place at a selective private college and not in the

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¹²³ *New York Times*, “Teachers Rebuked on Home Economics: Instructors Hear that Scarcity of Students is Due to Dull and Out-of-Date Courses,” October, 10, 1953.


average high school). The evolving curriculum reflected a changing notion of what women were capable of as well as their changing status in society.

By the 1960s, the language of personal finance taught in home economics began to shift from emphasis on the woman’s role to the shared responsibility of the family. The same publisher of the 1949 *Women and Their Money* educational guide was now promoting the team effort needed between husband and wife to properly handle finances in the 1960 *How To Stretch Your Money* booklet. Increasing numbers of women in the workplace and the increasing wealth and consumerism of American society blurred the traditional lines of who produced and who consumed.

While small, incremental headway was being made to de-gender personal finance and consumer education, an increasing push for general economic education may have undermined some of these efforts. During the 1950s, economists and politicians expressed a growing concern that students were not able to understand the structures and merits of the capitalist economic system. Economists specifically worried that the history teachers assigned to teach units on the fundamentals of economics were doing a very poor job and that only about 5 to 10 percent of students had access to an economics class. This culminated in a 1961 report from the American Economic Association (AEA) that argued for economics to be included as a standalone alone course in the high school curriculum and that it should be taught by an

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economist or teacher who had been adequately prepared in economic theory. Proposed units of study in the report included no mention of personal finance or consumer education. The AEA emphasized how businesses operate and the economy was structured, framing economic markets as something with tremendous influence over the lives of students but that students themselves could not influence.

It would be a disservice to discuss consumer education in the 1950s and 1960s without highlighting the Civil Rights movement. Brown vs. Board of Education brought sweeping standardization to school curricula throughout the United States. While it certainly did not eliminate differential educational opportunities for Black and White students based on race (through de jure segregation), it began to eliminate an explicitly differential education designed for servitude. More significant than access to curriculum, however, was the type of consumer activism occurring for Black students out of the classroom. Some of the most important strategies of the Civil Rights era, such as bus boycotts and lunch counter sit-ins, centered on political action intended to disrupt the relationship between consumers and producers. American segregation depended heavily on economic relationships and Black leaders knew that access to consumer markets was the first step toward economic equality. Student Civil Rights

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activist Ella Baker famously declared, “What we want is bigger than a hamburger,”\textsuperscript{131} indicating that access to goods and services that had previously been denied to an entire race of people was symbolic of access to the American way of life. For students like Ella, learning about the meaning and power of coordination as a consumer group came from extracurricular initiative and would not be found in standard textbooks of the era.

![Image of protesters and police officer]

\textit{4: Equal access to goods, services, stores and restaurants had symbolic importance during the Civil Rights movement; Moore, Charles/Black Star “African American protesters taunt a white police officer during a civil rights demonstration,” Birmingham, Alabama}

The publication of Silent Spring by Rachael Carlson in 1963 was also watershed moment in consumer education and advocacy.\textsuperscript{132} Carson revealed how goods purchased at the super market could impact an individual and family’s health in a direct, but invisible, way and her


ability to write for a broad audience helped to spark the modern environmental movement.\textsuperscript{133} Consumers realized that they couldn’t rely on producers to act in their best interest and that governmental policy, or lack thereof, had immediate impact on the home. Consequently, grassroots political activity found its way into the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) by the mid-1960s. While the AHEA wished to maintain a “stabilizing” force during the tumultuous social and political climate of the 1960s,\textsuperscript{134} they also sought to act in the public interest with members such as Caroline Wood calling for AHEA to “Mobilize Our Citizenship Potential.”\textsuperscript{135} Educators who had a stake in consumer education could no longer preach wise decision making in isolation. Students and teachers alike had to gain an awareness of the political issues of the day and act in concert with others to ensure their interests were protected.

Indeed, consciousness of consumer issues in political consciousness peaked during the 1960s and 1970s. For example, President Kennedy gave a “Special Message on Protecting the Consumer Interest” to Congress in 1962 which outlined four consumer rights: the right to safety, the right to be informed, the right to choose, and the right to be heard.\textsuperscript{136} Subsequently, President Johnson and President Nixon appointed a President’s Committee on Consumer Interest aimed at advising legislation and policy to improve consumer protection and knowledge, and President Ford later added a fifth consumer right to Kennedy’s: the right to consumer


\textsuperscript{134} AHEA. "Editorial ". *Journal of Home Economics* 58, no. 1 (1966), 8.


\textsuperscript{136} Langrehr, Frederick W., and Mason, Barry J. "The development and implementation of the concept of consumer education." *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 11, no. 2 (1977): 63-79.
education.\textsuperscript{137} These high profile political acts reflected a bi-partisan reaction to the concurrent grassroots organizing across the country mentioned above. Ralph Nader, who’s work on the lack of safety in the auto industry famously made him a target for harassment by industry hired thugs, launched him as a national figure and proponent of government action on behalf of consumer interest.\textsuperscript{138} Nader’s safety movement converged with the environmental movement and resulted in sweeping legislative achievements such as the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Transportation.

In conjunction with the civil rights and environmental movements of the 1960s, there was a groundswell of female activism for equal protection under the law and self-determination. Activists confronted long held assumptions regarding the role of women as consumers and the secondary valuation of domestic work. The women’s rights and women’s liberation movement took on male dominated professional and political establishment, seeking entry into areas in which they had previously been barred.\textsuperscript{139} Feminists also took a stand for positive identity development with “consciousness raising” that encouraged dialogue and skepticism of convention.\textsuperscript{140} The rally cry, “the personal is political,” challenged prior boundaries between domestic and public life and empowered women to take on the host of major and minor

\textsuperscript{137} Langrehr and Mason.

\textsuperscript{138} Pertschuk, M. \textit{Revolt against Regulation: The Rise and Pause of the Consumer Movement.} (University of California Press, 1983).

\textsuperscript{139} Freeman, Jo. "The Origins of the Women's Liberation Movement." \textit{American Journal of Sociology} (1973), 792-811.

injustices they faced every day. One of the targets of the feminist movement was home economics because of their support for traditionalist gender roles. For example, activist Robin Morgan told the American Home Economic Association in 1972, home economics classes produce women who are “a limp, jabbering mass of jelly waiting for marriage.”

The result of the women’s liberation movement on school curriculum was two-fold. The first was that many girls and their parents demanded a more rigorous curriculum that would help to prepare for college and future professional careers. The second result was that teachers could no longer assume that only girls would need to know the fundamentals of home economics and consumer education, both boys and girls would need to know how spend wisely and make informed purchases. By the mid-1970s, the curriculum was reflecting the changing gender norms with girls taking shop class and boys taking home economics, despite objections from the public that home economics would instill “effeminate tendencies” in boys. Home economics researchers by this time were increasingly conscious of generating classroom curriculum, materials, and texts that were nonsexist; though they noted there was much work to be done to reach these goals. Efforts to expand home economics programs to include boys did not increase total enrollments, however, as many girls chose other subjects of study. This is

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reflected in the data of Werhan and Way who report that an enrollment of about 25% of high school students each year in home economics was fairly constant from 1959-2003.\textsuperscript{145}

**Modern Developments**

On the coattails of the women’s liberation movement, home economics changed its emphasis from preparing homemakers to preparing all types of students to face the challenges of living and working in a consumer society. This shift was reflected in the 1994 name change of the American Home Economics Association to the American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences (AAFCS). Even these limited consumer education efforts offered through family and consumer sciences were narrowed and minimized in the 1980s and 1990s as the school accountability movement pushed for increased emphasis on reading, writing, math, and science and preparing students for a ‘competitive’ college and career environment.\textsuperscript{146}

In the 2000s, and especially following the financial crisis of 2008, many states have created personal finance mandates which can require schools to test students on personal finance, offer a course in personal finance, or set standards for the teaching of personal finance.\textsuperscript{147} Many of the mandates have limited impact, however, as only 19 states currently require at least a half-


\textsuperscript{147} Peng, Tzu-Chin Martina. "Evaluating Mandated Personal Finance Education in High Schools." PhD Dissertation. (The Ohio State University, 2008).
year course specifically in personal finance.\textsuperscript{148} Even within the group of states requiring a personal finance course there is great variation on what that means. In New Jersey, for example, schools are able to meet the half year minimum course requirement by paying a private educational company (Educere) to administer an online personal finance course to their students. Additionally, the half year mandate allows schools to fit in the curriculum at any point in high school so that exposure to financial learning might come too early, before many students have had their first experience with a job or bank account, or too late, when some may have already made injurious financial decisions. Harkening back to the 50-year-old concerns of the American Economic Association, there are no specific requirements to teach economics in schools and the classes can be staffed by teachers with little or no training in personal finance or economics. As a result, many schools are following in the footsteps of Thrift educators 100 years ago by turning to global financial companies to train their teachers or provide class content to students, which seems like an odd place to go in order to resolve the tension of producer/consumer information asymmetry described in the introductory chapter.\textsuperscript{149}

Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed the historical development consumer education in the United States, providing evidence that changes in the consumer education curriculum and the average exposure of public school students to that curriculum coincided with evolving concerns from the public regarding consumer issues. For example, schools emphasized sanitary food preparation


\textsuperscript{149} Some examples are PWC’s “Earn Your Future” curriculum or Bank of America’s partnership with Khan Academy to teach personal finance.
during the Progressive era when society was beginning to understand the dangers posed by germs, and schools emphasized the dangers of chemicals in consumer products in the 1970s as scientific data was being gathered which demonstrated the risks of such chemicals. During these time periods, popular concern and scientific research interacted in a way that directed consumer education to address public health and social concerns, albeit in often gendered and racialized ways. This is no accident. The founders of home economics advocated for their discipline to be included in public school curricula because there was a fear that young people were not learning from the scientific advances in sanitation, nutrition, and thrift in the home. This fear was propelled by media and cultural portrayals of urban slums and immigrant stereotypes, as well as by the radically rapid transformation from an agricultural to urban society where diets were increasingly relying on packaged and prepared foods produced in unknown places, and household products such as detergents and cleaners were made of chemicals with unknown effects. As the current era of neoliberal politics and economic objectives has pushed schools to focus on workforce development, and citizens have increasing anxiety about access to middle-class careers, consumer education has dramatically waned. This relationship, between consumer education and the public interest, will be the subject of the following chapter.

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CHAPTER 3: THE CIVIC ARGUMENT FOR CONSUMER EDUCATION

“To an extent, we get the big businesses we deserve. No conversation about the role of business in society is complete without considering the role of the public. Ultimately it is the public – as consumers, as citizens – who create the environment in which business operates.”
— Jon Miller and Lucy Parker

Introduction: Civic Consciousness and the Schools

The preparation of students in public schools for participation in civic life is a perennial concern of educational researchers and lay citizens alike. What Labaree called the “democratic” function of the schools emphasizes the need for students to equitably gain the knowledge and skills necessary to assess problems and take coordinated action to influence various levels of democratic government. Yet, Labaree also notes that this egalitarian and collective focus has been supplanted by private and economic concerns in recent decades. This characterization about the behavior and values of citizens in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been echoed in critical scholarship as reflective of neoliberalism’s ascendancy in educational institutions. For example, Di Leo, Donoghue, and Nussbaum worry that the corporatization, careerism, and credentialism pervasive in educational institutions is superseding modes of thinking and expression that do not easily equate a monetary value, such as civic engagement or creativity. This fear is existential for these scholars, at both a social level, as they see

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communitarian values necessary to bind the democratic society together and protect vulnerable populations, and at a personal level, as many have witnessed university administrations downsize or even eliminate academic programs that do not generate enough revenue. Beyond the educational sphere, Schudson has characterized a lack of civic engagement as the major focus in democratic social theory of the last thirty years.

Various sociologists, historians, political theorists, and media activists in the 1980s and 1990s determined that the United States was in a dangerous move away from community and toward a narcissistic, individualistic, private, consumer-oriented model of life. Robert Bellah, Christopher Lasch, Robert Putnam, and Michael Sandel, among others, wrote eloquently about the need to restore community and the moral bonds that hold it together.¹⁵⁴

This cultural critique has been echoed in empirical social science studies such as Arnett, Binder et al., and Silva which indicate that young adults are internalizing neoliberal norms, pursuing self-interested goals because of economic uncertainty, and developing a skepticism that the government and public institutions can positively affect their lives.¹⁵⁵ Other studies, such as Rubin,¹⁵⁶ examine the ways in which traditional measures of civic knowledge and engagement do not adequately capture informal and nuanced experiences today’s students, especially students from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds. In short, modern scholars point to a pressing


need to reassess what citizenship can and should be in the 21st century, and the place of schools in educating those citizens.

While the question of civic values and participation may be in vogue in recent decades, it is hardly the first time intellectual thought has focused on the problem. During the industrial revolution in the United States, many people gave serious consideration to the question of democratic participation as the country transitioned from a rural to urban majority populace, and as the religious and racial makeup of its citizenry became less homogenous. The creation of social studies as an academic subject for public school students is especially indicative of these influences. In 1916, the National Education Association’s (NEA) Committee on Social Studies (CSS) authored a report advocating for a major change in the curriculum for secondary schools which has subsequently had “unquestioned” influence on the development of social studies as field. Fallace identifies the call for social studies as emblematic of the Progressive Era’s push for social improvement, which has been interpreted both conventionally as having a genuine humanistic concern for social justice, or critically as a set of policy and institutional mechanisms to strengthen corporate, bureaucratic mentality and control. The merit of competing historiographical interpretations is less significant than the suggested curricular outcomes which did not simply teach about the structures of democratic government, major historical events, or the demographic and geographic makeup of the country; but contained an underlying normative thrust that students should learn their place in the socio-political system and how changes are

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made within it. As such, the CSS recommended the introduction of two new courses, Community Civics and a capstone senior course titled Problems of Democracy (POD), to serve as interdisciplinary explorations into current issues facing American society.

**John Dewey and Public Education**

The Committee on Social Studies was well versed in John Dewey’s educational philosophy and actively cited some of Dewey’s work in their report.\(^{159}\) Of particular relevance was Dewey’s *Ethical Principles Underlying Education* (1897/1903), where Dewey argued that “Interest in community welfare” and “in perceiving whatever makes for social order and progress . . . is the ultimate ethical habit to which all the special school habits must be related.”\(^ {160}\) As examples, academic subjects such as geography should link “the immediate social occupations and groupings of men with the whole natural system which ultimately conditions them” and history should be “measured by the extent to which past events are made the means of understanding the present,—affording insight into what makes up the structure and working of society to-day.”\(^ {161}\) Interestingly, the CSS report was released in the same year as *Democracy and Education* (1916) where Dewey did not abandon history or geography as stand-alone disciplinary subjects, but instead advocated for their instruction in a more integrated, participatory, and experimental approach.\(^ {162}\) While particular curricular prescriptions diverged

\(^ {159}\) Fallace, John Dewey’s influence on the origins of the social studies.


between Dewey and the CSS, both efforts represent a “theoretically consistent educational ideal” which provide a normative framework for applied, democratic, and relevant pedagogy.\footnote{Fallace, p. 618; Jorgensen, C. Gregg, "Unraveling Conflicting Interpretations: A Reexamination of the 1916 Report on Social Studies" (2010). All Graduate Theses and Dissertations. 633. https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd/633, Jorgenson’s dissertation thoroughly reviews the background, influences on, and interpretations of the 1916 report and concludes “the central finding of this dissertation is that John Dewey may have been a more significant influence on the 1916 committee members and Report than suggested by many contemporary scholars. As a result, the 1916 Report on Social Studies might be seen as more strongly representing Deweyan principles.”}

There was a shift, however, in Dewey’s focus in the decade that followed Democracy and Education where he turned his attention from the development of the individual within a society to the development of coordinated groups, institutions, and states.\footnote{Jerome Popp makes an interesting argument about how Dewey acknowledged Democracy and Education as an incomplete philosophy because it understated the role of social structures. Popp characterizes Democracy and Education as having “I” intentionality of its actors whereas the later Public and Its Problem and Ethics as have “we” intentionality. Popp, Jerome A. "John Dewey’s theory of growth and the ontological view of society." Studies in Philosophy and Education 34, no. 1 (2015): 45-62.} Mason notes that the circumstances surrounding of World War I weighed heavily on Dewey, “Dewey became disillusioned by the conduct of the American government at home, which used mass media to manufacture support while cracking down on public dissent”.\footnote{Mason, Lance. “The ‘Dewey-Lippmann’ Debate and the Role of Democratic Communication in the Trump Age.” Dewey Studies, volume 1(1) (2017): 91-92.} His book The Public and Its Problems (1927) in particular concerned itself with the entire process by which citizens relate to the state and mechanisms by which knowledge, information, and communication allow for the influence of people over each other.\footnote{John Dewey, The Public and its Problems. (Athens: Swallow Press, 1954).} As will be discussed in the chapter below, the
mechanisms by which a group of people become aware of shared interests and their ability to take coordinated action were, for Dewey, the basis of democracy.

There are two primary reasons for choosing *The Public and Its Problems* as a focus for analysis in exploring a normative framework of civic participation and the relationship to consumptive practices. The first reason is that the text provides an extraordinarily prescient and philosophically sound vocabulary for understanding civic relationships and the requirements of education, broadly speaking, for a democratic public. Famously, *The Public and Its Problems* was partially written in response to the ideas proposed by Walter Lippmann about the relationship between experts and ordinary citizens in handling the problems faced by society and ensuring public officials represented their interests. Dewey recognized that education and democracy were intertwined – both depended on communication, conjoint action, and scientific experimentation.

Unlike Lippmann’s conception, which posited an isolated psychological and cognitive notion of construction, Dewey’s conception of the public demonstrated a more profound understanding of the social construction of knowledge and its democratic implications. In Dewey’s formulation, opinions could not be understood in isolation from the communicative processes that produced them, as “every act of communication requires an individual to give form to what had previously been formless, and in doing so changes the attitude of that person toward his or her own experiences as they relate to the experiences of others.”

These elements of Dewey’s philosophy have endured in educational theory and philosophy and are echoed in constructivist paradigms of knowledge articulated in recent decades which emphasize social contexts and deliberation. The second reason for closely studying *The Public and Its Problems* is its insistence on breaking down the distinction between individual and social

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167 Mason, 93-94.
action, and the hierarchy of institutional action over other coordinated social efforts. Mason, in describing Dewey’s conception of a healthy democracy, writes that for Dewey, “the strength of a democracy depended not only on its formal institutions, but also on the everyday behavior of its citizens. Under-conceptualizing the importance of routine interactions has arguably proven to be a key factor in the degradation of contemporary democracy.”

The enduring value of Dewey’s position is recognizing that governments, institutions, or officials cannot operate in a democracy independently of citizens because their power is derived from those people. Further, within a given state, citizens are bound by innumerable connections to have shared interests with one another (whether they recognize it or not) and should they begin to communicate and take experimental actions together they can unlock their latent power.

This chapter seeks to build upon John Dewey’s theory of public formation and education to provide a civically-oriented normative foundation for educational institutions to reevaluate their role as actors in the public sphere and educators of a consuming public. First, I will analyze the main ideas John Dewey put forth in *The Public and Its Problems* with specific emphasis on the nature of the public or publics, how knowledge is communicated and interpreted, and the competencies and dispositions required of citizens to successfully act together. I will then turn to a modern example of miseducation and public action, the Jade Helm conspiracy of 2015 and its impact on Texas and U.S. politics, as a means to test the relevance of Dewey’s framework in the 21st century. I underscore in both the analysis of Dewey and the modern Jade Helm case the importance of information production and consumption, namely what actors or institutions are providing data about important issues that the public is consuming and acting upon.

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168 Mason, 82.
The Public and Its Problems

At the most basic level, in *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey argues that a public is a group of individuals who are concerned about the consequences of action between others. Stated succinctly, “Transactions between singular person and groups bring a public into being when their indirect consequences—their effects beyond those immediately engaged in them—are of importance.” This can apply at a small scale, as with two individuals who get into a physical altercation and a surrounding community who wish to see be peacefully resolved so that more individuals are not drawn into the fray. Or it can apply at a large scale, as with two corporate powers who are colluding to drive up the prices of a needed commodity and a global marketplace that wants to prevent unfair pricing. In these cases, a public is formed by the constituents who want to prevent negative consequences or to direct positive consequences in a way that improves their wellbeing. Importantly, Dewey notes that publics are not always ‘aware’ of themselves, even if they are united by common concern. It is through communication and social organization that a public comes into being and attempts to establish mechanisms to protect itself.

Historically, various forms of chiefdoms, kingdoms, and governments have served as a primary mechanism for representing the needs of publics. These ruling bodies dictate and enforce laws and procedures which are designed to regulate the actions of individuals and groups so as to control outcomes. Because of the ever-changing nature of human activity, consequences and publics are continually dynamic and evolving. Ruling bodies can never represent all concerns at a given moment and historically the concerns of particular publics are given more attention than others. For instance, concerns of nobility or the wealthy have had precedence in who the laws and enforcement were designed to protect. But over time, as peoples throughout

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the world have developed an awareness of themselves as having shared interest, the forms of the state have changed (through both revolutionary and piecemeal means) to represent more democratic interests. Dewey writes, “Thus we come upon the primary problem of the public: to achieve such recognition of itself as well give it weight in the selection of official representatives and in the definition of their responsibilities and rights.”

In this regard, Dewey’s theory about the public and ‘the state’ is unique for not judging either as independent and abstract concepts, where the rights of individuals or duties of state are drawn from a priori principles, rather publics and the state arise and change in continuing response to social interactions. Hence, a truth is revealed about something like a Constitution or a Bill of Rights that is more significant than the principles contained within these formative documents- that the principles were created by a public which possessed self-recognition.

In the fourth chapter of *The Public and Its Problems*, entitled “The Eclipse of the Public,” Dewey, with an amazing degree of prescience, explores a number of forces in industrial democracies that seem to confuse and dissuade participation of individuals in publics, and to dis-incentivize governments to serve as the “organs” of those publics. Like his prior text, *Democracy and Education*, Dewey posits that these modern trends and associated problems have arisen in the transition from community based, agricultural living characterized by homogeneity to a atomized, industrial society characterized by heterogeneity. He makes great efforts to

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171 Dewey, 121.

172 Dewey was certainly not the first scholar to bring attention to the social implications of this transition. German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies wrote about this in 1887, and later Max Weber, who used the terms ‘Gemeinschaft’ to describe a society bound by tradition and social bonds and ‘Gesellschaft’ to describe a more market-oriented society bound by logic, hierarchy, and formal social relations (as through contracts or organizational titles). See Inglis, David.
frame the issue in detail by describing how a government like the United States is enabled by technologies of transit and communication to govern and shape the interactions of an entire continent while at the same time the individuals amongst that society are strangers to one another and have a fragmented understanding of what is taking place around them. Dewey writes, “Where is the public these officials are supposed to represent?” and “If a public exists, surely it is uncertain about its own whereabouts…”, going on to lament that at the time of his writing a majority of individuals do not even bother to vote.\textsuperscript{173}

Dewey postulates a number of causes for the disinterest and apathy among the public, several of which are raised in Walter Lippmann’s \textit{The Phantom Public}, which Dewey directly references\textsuperscript{174}: the rise of corporations who can pay for a team of lawyers and lobbyists to keep sustained interest and pressure on the state, the development of political party machines which advance particular issues and quash others with only limited responsiveness to public concerns, the growing importance of experts and administrative officials who can grasp complex issues and technologies to a degree the public cannot, and elected officials whose interests are rarely

\begin{quote}
"Cosmopolitan sociology and the classical canon: Ferdinand Tönnies and the emergence of global Gesellschaft." \textit{The British journal of sociology} 60, no. 4 (2009): 813-832. Similarly, W.E.B. Du Bois conducted extensive sociological investigations at the turn of the twentieth century into both rural and urban communities to understand the significant social, political, and economic transitions that were taking place and their immediate impact on individuals and families. For an overview, see Jakubek, Joseph, and Spencer D. Wood. "Emancipatory empiricism: The rural sociology of WEB Du Bois." \textit{Sociology of Race and Ethnicity} 4, no. 1 (2018): 14-34.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{173} Dewey, \textit{The Public and its Problems}, 117.

aligned with the majority of their constituents. Coupled with this evidence of misalignment between those in power and the average citizen, is the problem of what we would today call ‘globalization.’ “The local face-to-face community has been invaded by forces so vast, so remote in initiation, so far-reaching in scope and so completely indirect in operation, that they are, from the standpoint of the members of local social units, unknown.”175 Here, both Dewey and Lippmann underscore an apparent ignorance amongst the public about problems which are having the most significant consequences upon their lives.

Rather than pausing his analysis here, as Lippmann had by declaring that perhaps the public could not be involved in the administration and governance of modern issues, Dewey seeks to understand the impediments for publics to come into being and to sustain a self-awareness and involvement in the political process so that he could suggest a path forward. Importantly, he asserts that the problem is not that there is too little or no public, but rather that there are too many confused publics, unaware of their relations to exert power.

Such is our thesis regarding the eclipse which the public idea and interest have undergone. There are too many publics and too much of public concern for our existing resources to cope with. The problem of a democratically organized public is primarily and essentially an intellectual problem, in a degree to which the political affairs of prior ages offer no parallel.176

By posing this ‘intellectual problem,’ Dewey implicitly and explicitly establishes the groundwork to implement (perhaps not unsurprisingly for anyone familiar with his prior work) a project of public education with all of its inherent communicative, social, and experimental trappings. The pervasive political alienation caused by the factors described above, where

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176 Dewey, 126.
“thousands feel their hollowness even if they cannot make their feeling articulate,”\textsuperscript{177} can be solved if democratic societies fully undertake the task of developing aware and engaged publics.

**Educating the Public**

Dewey’s first assertion is that “An inchoate public is capable of organization only when the indirect consequences are perceived, and when it is possible to project agencies which order their occurrence.”\textsuperscript{178} This statement conveys two aspects of Dewey’s educational philosophy, 1) that individuals need the ability to ascertain information and make sense of the forces acting on them, and 2) that this knowledge has value when it is put toward a common purpose and effect in the world. In regards to the need for information and understanding, Dewey cautions that there is no particular set of political principles or social theories that will help individuals operate in the increasing complex world. He gives several examples of how principles such as ‘states-rights’ or ‘free markets’ become contradictory when a person attempts to apply them in all situations, writing “the social situation has been so changed by the factors of an industrial age that traditional general principles have little practical meaning”\textsuperscript{179} and “the developments of industry and commerce have so complicated affairs that a clear-cut, generally applicable, standard of judgement becomes practically impossible.”\textsuperscript{180} If one would were to apply Dewey’s ideas to a formulation of consumer education, as I will do later in this chapter and in the conclusion of the dissertation, it is obvious that a meaningful curriculum would focus as much on

\textsuperscript{177} Dewey, 135.
\textsuperscript{178} Dewey, 131.
\textsuperscript{179} Dewey, 133.
\textsuperscript{180} Dewey, 133-134.
behavioral outcomes as on the ‘content’ being studied, and would avoid prescriptive formulations and totalizing theories.

The first question that Dewey’s philosophy must address: where and how do publics go about gathering and interpreting information on issues of consequence? A specific process that Dewey envisions is for publicly supported scientific inquiry into significant issues for the explicit purpose of disseminating findings to the public and informing public policy. His proposed scientific apparatus is unique from the existing scientific fields in several regards. Dewey argues that research ought to investigate root causes of societal problems and possible policy experimentations, which stands in opposition to typical research that examines correlations rather than causation, and focuses on treatments to symptoms rather than underlying issues. To give a modern example, Dewey might emphasize research on factors which contribute to public health, such as water and air quality or access to nutritional foods, over treatments for individuals already ill as with pharmaceutical research. Further, public support of this research helps ensure it is conducted in a neutral spirit which does not suggest a course of action. He writes that successful scientific inquiry depends upon experts not in “framing and executing policies, but in discovering and making known the facts upon which the former depend.” In this regard, publics should both set the research agenda and be capable of evaluating its results.

With the relationship of science to publics established, Dewey emphasizes the essential importance of dissemination in this process by intermediaries such as the press. Here Dewey envisions a press that goes beyond ‘the news,’ which he characterizes as unorganized “breaches

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181 Dewey, 198, 201.

182 Dewey, 208.
of continuity”\textsuperscript{183} to thoughtfully investigate issues of public concern and identify relationships to other events or social forces. It is critical here that news and media sources can distill and present important issues to the public in a way that enables them to understand what is going on in the world and how it might affect themselves or their communities. He writes, “Presentation is fundamentally important, and presentation is a question of art.”\textsuperscript{184} Hinting at the importance of aesthetics and meaning making that he would spend more time considering in his later work, Dewey contends that a less orthodox press, or perhaps literature itself, can be effective in “breaking through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness” to bring awareness to the public. \textsuperscript{185} Of fundamental importance is that the consumer of media be provided accurate information along with the space to use imagination and draw connections for the formation of a meaningful opinion.

An obvious concern for Dewey’s positioning of both scientist and journalists is whether or not they, or any other profession, can be truly neutral and objective arbiters of information. His heavy criticism of these activities when funded by for-profit corporations leads one to the conclusion he did not believe neutrality could occur in any setting. The question of whether inquiry and data could be unbiased is well acknowledged by Dewey who calls it the essential question of his project. “That is the problem of the public. We have asserted that this improvement depends essentially upon freeing and perfecting the processes of inquiry and of dissemination of their conclusion.”\textsuperscript{186} He suggests that the mechanism for freeing research and

\textsuperscript{183} Dewey, 180.

\textsuperscript{184} Dewey, 183.

\textsuperscript{185} Dewey, 183.

\textsuperscript{186} Dewey, 208.
dissemination would rely on a quasi-public, or fully public, research and press operation – something we might recognize today in institutions like the National Institutes of Health or National Public Radio, but in a much more robust and accessible form. While even these institutions carry their own biases and presuppositions, written into their missions is a commitment to the public good and there is a mechanism for checking their realization of that mission – the public.

This leads to the sense-making and aims-giving responsibility of the public, engendered through citizens who are educated so at to be capable of these tasks. Dewey writes that it is not necessary that “the many should have the knowledge and skill to carry on the needed investigations; what is required is that they have the ability to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concern.” Importantly, the building of knowledge and sense-making described by Dewey do not happen in isolation, and in fact are manifested in the means by which individuals communicate, relate, and socialize in various cultural settings and institutions. He says explicitly that knowledge, self-realization, and democratic community building go hand in hand,

To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires, and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values. Dewey’s conclusion about the necessity of a healthy civic interdependence follows logically from this premise, where he argues that social aims are improved when everyone contributes to their creation and application. “The perfecting of the means and ways of communication of

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187 Dewey, 209.

188 Dewey, 154.
meanings so that genuinely shared interest in the consequences of interdependent activities may inform desire and effort and thereby direct action. Based on this understanding, democracy is never an ideal to strive toward, rather is it a dynamic form of living where learning, communication, and public action are inexorably intertwined.


The current state of public interaction, information dissemination and consumption, and the political consequences of these activities, pose an especially relevant and difficult challenge to the theory of publics proposed by Dewey. The internet, once hailed as an avenue to democratize knowledge while enabling and strengthening social connections, is increasingly viewed as a hub of disinformation, fake news, conspiracies, ‘trolling’, narcissism, and impulsiveness. Recent social science research has found that the more time individuals spend online consuming information about and discussing a particular issue, the more negatively they feel about the problem and the more negative input they generate in online platforms. Some of the consequences of these negative informational feedback loops include conspiracy theories, improper health practices, hyper polarization and partisanship. These results seem to run contrary to Dewey’s assertion in *Democracy and Education* that

...any social arrangement that remains vitally social, or vitally shared, is educative to those who participate in it...not only does social life demand teaching and learning for its

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189 Dewey, 155.


own permanence, but the very process of living together educates. It enlarges and enlightens experience; it stimulates and enriched imagination; it creates responsibility for accuracy and vividness of statement and thought.\textsuperscript{192}

Clearly, as communities of ‘anti-vaxxers’ and the ‘alt-right’ proliferate and strengthen harmful positions, we must assume that communication in-and-of itself does not inherently lead to responsibility and accuracy as most individuals would describe those terms. Dewey’s description of the powers and properties of communication must be read in the context of his larger theory about the educative process. I will examine a recent 2015 conspiracy theory about U.S. Military operation Jade Helm 15 and its subsequent impact on rural communities in Texas as an extreme case of communication gone wrong. The case viewed superficially appears as counterpoint to Dewey, but close examination reveals the enduring value his framework and possible avenues for positive intervention.

In the early months of 2015, the U.S. military announced it would be conducting training operations across several states in the Southern U.S. during the summer months of 2015 which would involve four of the five branches of the military. The stated purpose was to prepare troops for overseas operations in a civilian environment.\textsuperscript{193} Almost immediately, conspiracies surrounding the exercise began appearing on the internet and were further promoted on digital radio shows like Alex Jones’ InfoWars.\textsuperscript{194} The two major thrusts of conspiracies concerned the

\textsuperscript{192} Dewey, \textit{Democracy and Education}, 6.

\textsuperscript{193} U.S. Army Special Operations Command. “Request to Conduct Realistic Military Training (RMT) Operation Jade Helm 15.” Retrieved April 13, 2020 from: https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B3axduuybL0jdjZQUjhsSmJsZTA/edit

naming of the exercise “Jade Helm” and the mapping of Southern and Western states in the proposed exercise which named Texas and Utah as “hostile,” California, Nevada, and Colorado as “friendly”, and Arizona and New Mexico as “uncertain.”. Conspiracy theorists argued Jade Helm was a reference to China who was believed to be involved, and perhaps leading, the project. This coincided with prominent right-wing and conservative speculations at the time that President Obama was a socialist or socialist sympathizer and was working with the Chinese. The map provided by the military of the operations furthered this speculation, as the hostile, friendly, and uncertain designations of states seemed to map directly onto Republican (“hostile”) and Democratic (“friendly”) voting preferences in recent years. 195 Theorists claimed that calling Jade Helm an “exercise” was a cover for what would be an actual takeover by the U.S. military of political dissidents.

Knowledge and rumors derived from the proposed Jade Helm conspiracies circulated in rural Texas communities quickly, where residents, already skeptical of outsiders and large governmental action, assumed there was merit to the conspiracies. Military spokespeople insisted that their drills and exercises were being “misinterpreted” by conspiracy theorists and attempted to provide further details and transparency on the operation to allay fears. 196 This was to no avail, as by April local town meetings were swarmed by angry citizens demanding to know


the truth behind the operations and declaring military spokespeople at the meetings liars. Paranoia and anger reached such a fever pitch that the Governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, announced he would deploy the Texas Guard to monitor the U.S. military operations so that “Texans know their safety, constitutional rights, private property rights and civil liberties will not be infringed.” Texas representatives in both the Democratic and Republican parties criticized Abbott’s decision, with one representative publicly stating that Abbott was “pandering to idiots.” Facing mounting local concern and criticism, the U.S. military significantly scaled back the size of the operation with only a few hundred special forces soldiers participating in the summer exercise, which was completed without incident (or arrest of “dissidents”) by September as scheduled. Retrospectively, the CIA revealed that the Russian government may have played a role in stoking the conspiracy theories on social media platforms and that the Jade Helm 15 incident was a precursor operation to the Russian election meddling of November 2016.

*Applying Dewey to the Jade Helm Case*

At a broad level of analysis through a Deweyian lens, this incident seems to encapsulate his dynamic principle of public formations. In the case of Jade Helm, while the U.S. Military released information about what should have been a standard exercise to a public composed of

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198 Pollock and Samuels.

199 Pollock and Samuels.

the entire U.S. population, only a percentage of individuals in states marked as ‘hostile’ by the military for the purposes of the exercises took notice and responded. A new ‘public’ was formed, made of up of individuals consuming a heavy diet of conservative talk-radio and internet forums, who were predisposed for particular interpretations of the announcement and who resided in states like Texas which would be negatively affected if those interpretations had merit. This public sought out more information about the operation, and believing as a matter of first principles that the federal government could not be trusted, looked to other sources of knowledge—regardless if they were patently false. On the internet they found a wellspring of fledging theories on platforms such as Reddit and 4chan where unverified user content and governmental documents, taken out of context or carefully doctored, reinforced speculation of a global conspiracy. These platforms also allowed for this growing public to communicate effectively, attracting the attention of other like-minded and concerned individuals, and strengthened the sense of validity of concern and solidarity against the federal government. Local news providers, as for-profit operations seeking higher readership and ratings, did not dispel the conspiracies but in fact provided further speculation and specious online sources for residents to explore.201 Local and state politicians took notice of this animated new public and responded to their concerns by placing demands upon the U.S. military to scale back or even cease the planned operations, and without the authority to do so marshalled the local state guard to police the military.

201 Baddour, Covert warfare coming to Texas sparks some fears of federal takeover, 2015.
True to Dewey’s assessment, a self-aware and animated public can “break existing political forms”\textsuperscript{202} as in this case by undermining the federal government’s authority by forcing a state governor to take the abnormal action of mobilizing a state militia on behalf of local ‘public interest.’ What is significant about such a case is not that the public or political representatives acted correctly or on the basis of accurate information, but that the mechanisms are in place to collectively act to mitigate unwanted consequences. Dewey, while painting a positive view of the role of communication to enhance public awareness and formation, is honest about the faults that often arise in public sentiment, admitting for example “popular opinion is little troubled by the questions of logical consistency”\textsuperscript{203} and “the rule has been to look with suspicion and greet with hostility the appearance of anything new”.\textsuperscript{204} And he further admits that democratic political forms are “deeply tinged by fear of government, and … actuated by a desire to reduce it to a minimum so as to limit the evil it could do.”\textsuperscript{205} The result for society is that limitations and biases of the public do not get corrected by the state but rather directed into coordinated action.

Since the public forms a state only by and through official and their acts, and since holding official position does not work a miracle of transubstantiation, there is nothing perplexing nor even discouraging in the spectacle of the stupidities and errors of political behavior. The facts which give rise to the spectacle should, however, protect us from the illusion of expecting extraordinary change to follow from a mere change in political agencies and methods. Such a change sometimes occurs, but when it does, it is because the social conditions, in generating a new public, have prepared the way for it; the state sets a formal seal upon forces already in operation by giving them a defined channel through which to act.\textsuperscript{206}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{202} Dewey, \textit{The Public and Its Problems}, 56.
\bibitem{203} Dewey, 91.
\bibitem{204} Dewey, 58.
\bibitem{205} Dewey, 86.
\bibitem{206} Dewey, 68.
\end{thebibliography}
Dewey is describing a scenario where democratic representatives and officials are going to act in ways that reflect the organization, animation, and power of the respective publics exerting influence upon them, which may indeed create contradictory and hypocritical stances for both governmental actors and institutions. While at one level it is alarming that conspiracy theorists can generate enough interest and fear to marshal a military response, in another way it reflects a positive notion that the state is doing what it is supposed to do—respond to the public.

Dewey argues that though the logic or result of public influence might be flawed, that there are responses, changes, and experimentations based on that influence is a positive symptom of democratic process,

> Popular government is educative as other modes of political regulation are not. It forces a recognition that there are common interests, even though the recognition of what they are is confused; and in the need it enforces of discussion and publicity brings about some clarification of what they are.\(^\text{207}\)

Like the Texas public that was responding to federal government activities through a biased prism, public communication, action, and impact on institutions and public officials can amplify these fears and biases, but it can also bring attention to areas of legitimate concern and force public officials to be responsive to the public they are supposed to serve. Whipple, in analyzing the role of conflict and “problematic situations” in Dewey’s social theory, writes

> Problematic situations arise continually through practice and are positive corollaries of living a socially engaged, participatory life; constructive conflict, in other words, exists within action, rather than rational debate, and leads to individual actors using active, reflective processes of judgment to rectify and overcome the discord.\(^\text{208}\)

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Hence, competing mobilizations of publics in a democracy are educative and are propelled by the problems encountered in modern society of how to successfully live together. The ability to productively resolve or deal with these problems is either enhanced when the individuals engaged in the process have the skills of communication, reflection, and judgement or substantially harmed when individuals rely on untested assumption, bias, and superstition.

‘Public’ Consumer Education

The ascendant public school system of the twentieth century, earned the designation ‘public’ because it functioned to provide broad access as well as to serve a public interest. Yet the public school curricula were relatively static and prescribed, handed down from disciplinary fields to the public. In contrast, social studies and home economics, unlike many other ‘traditional’ disciplines of the school such as math, science, or English, envisioned its curriculum as a collection of issue and skill based responses to the pressing needs of the era. If public school schools were for the public, social studies and home economics were intended to be of the public. I am not claiming that social studies and home economics did not develop a kind of disciplinary apparatus, they certainly had professional and research organizations that recommended and prescribed curriculum, rather I am claiming that the members of these disciplines were attuned to the public in a way others were not. There are reasons for this related to power and the perceived gender of certain disciplines, but there are also reasons related to the perceived function by educators in the consumer education field, that they existed to meet the needs of the public (however understood at a particular time) in a deeply practical way. A social studies or home economics curriculum were designed with private and public interests in mind, so that schools could enable students to make informed judgements about their needs and wellbeing, as well as with aggregate public interests in mind, so that students could understand
how governments and markets function to take coordinated action to improve the general welfare.

Conclusion

What is significant about this history of consumer education (as outlined in Chapter 2), both in terms of purpose and content, was that it waxed and waned as a governmental and institutional response to public concerns. As I have demonstrated above, Dewey did not argue that the publics concerns were always well informed or valid, nor did he argue that any one institution or type of response could solve public problems, but rather that the better integrated publics and institutions were, and the more scientifically experimental they structured themselves to be, the healthier democracy would become. Much like the dawn of the 20th century saw a rise in public problems and challenges for consumers living in a rapidly changing world, the 21st century has its own consumer concerns such as political misinformation, plastic pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, or the socio-emotional effects of social media. In educational institutions there are piecemeal efforts in various disciplines to attend to these issues, which should be applauded and expanded, but there is a need for a more cohesive and grounded approach. The final chapter of this dissertation will suggest both institutional and curricular philosophies for schools which are both of and for the public wellbeing.
CHAPTER 4: THE ECONOMIC ARGUMENT FOR CONSUMER EDUCATION

“Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer.”
—Adam Smith, 1776

“It is a basic tenet of our economic system that information in the hands of consumers facilitates rational purchase decisions; and, moreover, is an absolute necessity for efficient functioning of the economy.”
—Federal Trade Commission, 1979

Introduction

In the past decade, there has been a rising interest in the lack of financial literacy education in public schools. Financial literacy refers to the general knowledge and skills an individual has regarding issues of personal finance such as budgeting, interest rates, and consumer financial products. Similarly, there is a growing youth “obesity crisis” where public health officials worry that people, overwhelmed by the amount of processed, unhealthy foods alongside nutritional misinformation, are unable to make sound food choices. Both issues, financial literacy and nutrition, are exemplars of areas of practical knowledge which fall under a broad heading of “consumer education” in that they have to do with improving the ability of individuals to make informed, healthy decisions regarding their wellbeing. As an education researcher, I have been puzzled by the relatively small amount of time spent on topics under the consumer education heading at all levels of the education system. At the center of my


puzzlement is what seems to be a contradiction. In our capitalist society, there is a prevailing narrative that free markets efficiently allocate resources and that aggregate wellbeing is improved when consumers are free to make choices.\textsuperscript{211} The set of theories that undergird these beliefs, drawn from neoclassical economics, assume that consumers act rationally and make informed choices. Yet, as noted in the introductory chapter, consumers are not provided an education on the best methods to gather and evaluate information in the market place, and the empirical data on financial and physical health seems to demonstrate that consumers are not acting ‘rationally’ in their self-interest.\textsuperscript{212}

The goal for this chapter is to explore some basic tenants of neoclassical economic theory, such as efficiency, specialization, and competition, and how those tenants relate to the place of the consumer, and consumer knowledge, in the marketplace. I am conducting this limited review of neoclassical economics and its prevailing assumptions, rather than Marxian or Keynesian economics which have a differing set of vocabularies and objectives, for two reasons. The first is that in the contemporary American context, it is neoclassical economics, and not Marxian or Keynesian that have a prevailing hold over the public policy sphere for the past three decades. If the overall goal of my dissertation is to justify consumer education on various normative grounds for the sake of pressing environmental concerns, it stands to reason I use frameworks that are widely accepted and used in public policy. Secondly, neoclassical


\textsuperscript{212} The field of economics is starting to catch up with this notion of irrationality, led specifically by work done in behavioral economics, but this behavioral turn is only just starting to have an impact on public policy which operates on neoclassical principles. Daniel Kahneman and Richard Thaler are two recent examples of behavioral economists who have won a Nobel Prize (2002 and 2017 respectively) for their work
economics, as I will describe in detail below, is an economic framework which often claims to place the consumer at the center of its theorizing, whereas Marxian economists would put the producer at the center and a Keynesian might put the government, or some other organization that understands macroeconomic theory, at the center. The centrality of the sovereign consumer carries with it particular assumptions, many of which have direct educational implications. Some examples of these assumptions are: that consumers have relevant and understandable information when making economic choices, that their choices are free and un-coerced, that they can make distinctions about the quality and consequences of their choices, and that their choices maximize self-interest. Given these assumptions, I need to interrogate the idea of the “sovereign” consumer in neoclassical economics as this person’s choices and transactions, free of coercion, generate the aggregate demand that efficiently directs the marketplace.

The characteristics of a sovereign consumer in neoclassical economic theory imply a significant level of knowledge, thinking, and evaluation. My goal in examining the foundational assumptions of neoclassical economics is not to argue for or against their validity, nor is it to advocate for or against their use in economic policy or governance. Rather, my objective is to demonstrate that any attempt to take neoclassical economic principles seriously would lead a person to the conclusion that educated consumers are better for market efficiency, and thus society, than un-educated consumers. I will further argue that if economic efficiency is a public good, as market rationalists purport, then consumer education ought to have a place in public school curricula alongside production oriented objectives such as workforce skill development.

Finally, noting that some market rationalists do not support public schools as an efficient mechanism for increasing human welfare, I will argue that the informed and rational consumer requisite for efficiency cannot arise without some form of socially coordinated educational effort.

**Overview of Neoclassical Economics and Market Rationalism**

The term “neoclassical economics” was first used in the early 20th century to identify a paradigm shift away from ‘classical economics’ which began in the mid-1800s and continued for the next fifty years.  

De Vroey, who traced the major distinctions in focus and aims between classical and neoclassical economics, noted the following changes in the field: a move from examining how economies grow to how resources are efficiently allocated, a change in the units of analysis from institutional/political entities to producer/consumer decision makers, and a change in the perception of value from having a material foundation (in either labor and/or resources) to value having a mental foundation (in how parties perceive utility or symbolic worth).

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Summarized further, classical economists such as Smith, Marx, and Ricardo were interested in capital wealth embodied in the means of production, and profits derived from labor processes.

Neoclassical economists, influenced by what was deemed “the marginal revolution” where it was recognized that *a good’s value is subjective to the buyer*, became fascinated by pricing and the value of various goods and services relative to the supply and demand. This change would have important socioeconomic and political implications into the 20th century. By separating goods from their production and focusing on price, economists ignored the material and social relations that gave rise to the goods themselves (perhaps leaving something for the newly forming physical and social sciences to study) while at the same time assigning monetary value to any and all human transactions. For neoclassical economists, material goods and labor became abstractions as commodities endlessly fluctuating in price, and the abstract price became the only ‘true’ value.

Neoclassical economists are by no means a monolithic group. And they especially have a diverse array of positions when it comes to public policy. For example, some are ‘supply side’ economists who advocate for policies that make it easier for producers to create and trade more
goods through lower taxes and regulation, whereas others are ‘demand side’ economists who advocate for policies that stimulate and empower consumer demand through public spending. Perhaps the most well-known threads of neoclassical economics in the second half of the 20th century were the Austrian school and the Chicago school, typified by Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman respectively. Hayek argued for carefully managed international economic systems which lowered barriers for the movement of goods and capital across borders (but notably not for people) and against nationalistic economic planning and intervention that had risen to prominence during the Great Depression and World War II with Keynesian economics. 

Friedman similarly advocated for a ‘liberal’ economic approach which emphasized individual property rights but opposed governmental interventions. Scholars in the social sciences and in Marxian economic schools characterized the Austrian and Chicago school economists as “neo-liberals”, a term which rose to prominence in the 1980s as Reagan and Thatcher governments adopted policies supported by neoliberal economists.

It is important to note that while different schools of economic thought co-exist and have waxing and waning influence on the political world, the neoliberal economists, through their initial influence on conservative politics in the 1980s, and later on all major U.S. political parties, popularized foundational concepts of neoclassical economics in political and cultural discourse. It is these concepts and assumptions which will be explored below.

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Before proceeding in an analysis of neoclassical economic concepts individually, it is worthwhile to consider a generic overview of the paradigm. Weintraub has done so here,

The framework of neoclassical economics is easily summarized. Buyers attempt to maximize their gains from getting goods, and they do this by increasing their purchases of a good until what they gain from an extra unit is just balanced by what they have to give up to obtain it. In this way they maximize "utility"—the satisfaction associated with the consumption of goods and services. Likewise, individuals provide labor to firms that wish to employ them, by balancing the gains from offering the marginal unit of their services (the wage they would receive) with the disutility of labor itself—the loss of leisure. Individuals make choices at the margin. This results in a theory of demand for goods, and supply of productive factors.218

There are many implied assumptions and values embedded in this description which are worth highlighting, and which will be analyzed below. First, is the existence of relations that are transactional – i.e. they take place in a market. Second, is a notion of participants who make choices based on self-interest, weighing various points of ‘satisfaction’. And thirdly, consuming is made equivalent to buying. Weintraub elaborates,

The neoclassical vision thus involves economic "agents," be they households or firms, optimizing (doing as well as they can), subject to all relevant constraints. Value is linked to unlimited desires and wants colliding with constraints, or scarcity. The tensions, the decision problems, are worked out in markets. Prices are the signals that tell households and firms whether their conflicting desires can be reconciled.219

Here we get more terms which are significantly important to the field of neoclassical economics: a notion of ‘optimization’ of desires by intelligent agents within a field of scarcity, a ‘market’ positioned as the arbiter of wants and needs, and ‘agents’ who face the possibility of conflict, success, or failure in the marketplace.

It is tempting to view the neoclassical framework for understanding the world as narrow, naive, incomplete, or flawed. But to dismiss it and its adherents as ‘market fundamentalists’

218 Weintraub, para 4.

219 Weintraub, para 6.
would be a mistake. Given that neoclassical economics is embedded in how individuals and
institutions with power throughout society view the world and make decisions, it is not merely an
economic lens for understanding market transactions, *it is an encompassing normative
framework*. In the public policy and political sphere, political leaders and bureaucrats (some of
whom are economists) take the premises put forth by neoclassical economists and seek to apply
them to public goods and institutions. Many scholars have noted that in recent decades local and
national governments have promoted economic interests by deregulating the business
environment and marketizing previously public services. This has been done using a philosophy
I will refer to, borrowing from the Australians (in particular Wright), as market rationalism.\(^\text{220}\) In
simplistic terms, which I will fully outline further, market rationalism refers to a set of beliefs
and principles which state that economic marketplaces maximize human well-being more
efficiently than any other system and, as such, governments should facilitate and protect free-
market economic transactions in order to improve the well-being of their citizens. Market
rationalists are called ‘rational’, not because their ideas may be considered more or less logical
than other positions, but because their positons are rationalized through market (ie neoclassical)
logic.

**The Market and Competition as a Means to Achieve Positive Outcomes**

What is ‘the market’? Put simply the market refers to the broad array of economic
transactions taking place at any given moment. It is where goods and services are brought at
sold at an agreed upon price. The market is named for the traditional marketplace, where
individuals brought goods they had produced to be sold or traded to individuals who would

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\(^{220}\) Wright, John. *The Ethics of Economic Rationalism*. (Sydney, Australia: UNSW
consume those goods. Contemporarily, the market has a much more robust connotation, as the range of goods and services are much more diverse and may not represent an actual product (for example, financial instruments or insurance policies) and digitization allows for a perpetual, geographically unbound venue of buying and selling. The aggregation of all the economic transactions taking place at a given time represent what many people now refer to as ‘the market’. Various measures, such as company stock indexes like the S&P500 or the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), are used by economists and others to make assessments about the relative health of the market.

In neoclassical economics, a key characteristic of the market is that it is made up of relatively free, individual, and un-coerced transactions. It is in this open environment of exchange that ‘efficiency’ thrives. Economic efficiency refers to the process of maximizing the benefits of human resources and labor while minimizing the cost and effort needed to achieve those benefits. Wright, summarizing Adam Smith, provides an example of a baker who wants to maximize his personal profits – in order to do so he must try to make something the community wants (it has quality) and that the community believes is a fair price (it is affordable). Quality and affordable bread are beneficial to the community, so there is a win-win scenario where the baker prospers and the community is happy. Further, the ability of the baker to improve his skill over time as well as his ability to produce large quantities of bread quickly, result from his ‘specialization’ in one trade. The community saves time and gets a better quality product from the Baker’s sole focus on baking. Competition amongst individuals or firms in the community lowers prices and further incentivizes innovation and improvement in products. Smith’s phrase “the invisible hand” derives from this notion that as a baker, butcher, shoemaker, etc.
independently pursue their self-interest in the marketplace, society collectively benefits from the efficiencies and quality achieved through specialization and profit seeking.\textsuperscript{221}

From the above description it evident that classical and neoclassical economics is laden with claims regarding process, structure, and outcomes. \textit{The most salient feature of this perspective is that higher degrees of efficiency in the economic marketplace lead to higher degrees of happiness and satisfaction amongst the greatest number of people.} At first glance this sounds like utilitarianism, the consequentialist ethical position which holds that an action ought to be taken which produces the greatest degree of happiness for the greatest number of people. Yet, economic rationalists often argue that the consumer must be given freedom of choice, and should consider one’s personal satisfaction when making economic decisions, a type of philosophical egoism divergent from utilitarianism. Regardless of the ethical label neoclassical capitalism falls under, by its own standards its success in achieving desirable outcomes can be measured. As Jacobsen writes,

\begin{quote}
The moral justification which the economic efficiency argument provides for either permitting or requiring the pursuit of profits does not depend upon the implausible assumption that there is something intrinsically good about making profits; rather, the pursuit of profits is argued to have intrinsically desirable consequences for the quality of life in our communities. The entire weight of the argument is borne by those consequences.\textsuperscript{222}
\end{quote}

Importantly, consequences do not cover the full normative picture of neoclassical economics. The paradigm, in placing value on individual liberty and autonomy, states that the goal is a qualified form of efficiency called „Pareto Efficiency.” Derived from the name of economist Vilfredo Pareto, can be briefly summarized as the most of efficient allocation of resources which

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\textsuperscript{221} Wright, 19-37.

\end{footnotesize}
would not cause one party to be worse-off. Pareto efficiency generally occurs organically in economic transactions because if one party was going to be harmed by an exchange they would not enter into it. In this regard, neoclassical economists view unequal incomes and distribution of resources as normal and as ‘efficient’.  

There are some obvious problems to the above notion of efficiency. For example, if one party controls a highly desirable resource, they can obtain a disproportionate return for that resource and become fabulously wealthy in the process. According to the above principles this would be ‘efficient’ but the outcome would not necessarily be ‘good.’ Neoclassical economists attribute these sorts of problems not to the marketplace, but to social, political, and ‘external’ factors which distort the marketplace. In fact, they postulate a set of hypothetical conditions that, if met, would lead to an ideal market and positive outcomes for all involved. The first condition is perfect competition – there are no monopolies or oligopolies which control an important resource or set unfair prices, and producers can quickly change production methods and products to meet market needs. Second, there is complete information – all the buyers and sellers in the marketplace are aware of all the options and prices available to them. Third, the consumer is sovereign – producers make products that satisfy the current needs and wants of customers. Finally, there are no externalities – there are not consequences of economic transactions that affect a party who did not choose to incur those costs or benefits. If all these conditions were met, the Pareto efficient outcome would also be one which produces the greatest satisfaction for all.

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It is easily understood that these preconditions would be difficult, if not impossible to achieve, but the point argued by neoclassical economists is that the closer one approaches the ‘ideal’ conditions the more positive the outcomes will be.\(^{225}\)

Information, knowledge, and decision making play crucial roles in increasing market efficiency. If producers have knowledge of what the needs of the population are and how to get goods or services to them, they are able to increase profits without over-producing. Similarly, if consumers are able to gather information on the goods and services available they can make comparisons of quality and price, and obtain the best value for their money. In a “perfectly efficient” market producers and consumers would both have complete information and make the most rational decision based on that information. This concept, rationality, plays a crucial role in neoclassical economics where economists followed the lead of utilitarian John Stuart Mill, and began developing mathematical functions of ‘utility’ to express satisfaction. Simon describes this transition to the modern economic understanding of rationality in this context (differing substantially from Adam Smith who did not talk about rationality but instead referred to how ‘reasonable’ people behave).

The substitution of utility maximization for a "reasonable person" principle as the central rule of economic decision making focused attention upon substantive rationality: the quality of the adaptation to the external environment in the light of the decision maker's utility function. At the same time, it justified ignoring substantial externalities.


\(^{225}\) The last pre-condition, no externalities, is an obvious focal point for environmentalists and will be examined at length in the last chapter of the dissertation. It is worth noting for now that traditionally economists try to downplay and undervalue the significance of externalities in their work for the sake of analysis of economic transactions, but when their own paradigm is evaluated as a normative framework and is forced to weigh non-economic values the implications are significant.
procedural rationality - the processes of decision.\textsuperscript{226}

In this sense, economists judged rationality in terms of measured results, and further assumed rationality was a standardized variable, applicable in all transactions. This view of rationality has changed in recent decades, with behavioral economists bringing attention to the varying ways individuals make decisions, often acting in ways that contradict their own stated aims. Importantly, however, it does not fundamentally undermine the neoclassical framework of understanding markets whether or not the actors behave rationally in all cases, because economists make assumptions about desired outcomes and associated decisions ‘as if’ actors wanted to maximize value.\textsuperscript{227}

To summarize the main points gleaned from neoclassical theory and assumptions regarding the place of consumers in achieving the goal of efficient markets; ideally consumers should 1) have high-quality information about products/services on the market and 2) act rationally to maximize the self-benefit (utility) of exchanges and minimize the costs to themselves. As noted, these ideal conditions are never fully achievable, but nonetheless desirable in seeking an aggregate social good. These ideals imply that actors have the ability to gather and assess data regarding the worth of goods, the discipline to properly weigh the costs and benefits of an economic exchange and its effects on one’s future, and the skill to calculate and plan the use of one’s resources in a sustainable way. In other words, \textit{neoclassical economists assume or imply that participants in an efficient market are educated.}

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From Theory to Practice: Consumer and Consumer Protection in the Marketplace

Beginning with initiatives during the Progressive era, with the first safe food and drug acts (1906), and peaking before the defeat of Jimmy Carter’s proposed Consumer Protection Agency (1978), there existed a consensus in American politics that the public should be protected from unsafe products and unscrupulous business practices which they may not be able to protect themselves from. The federal laws from the 1910s-1970s implied that consumers were often at an informational disadvantage relative to producers because it was not possible for consumers to know what factors went into producing a product and assess the relative quality of innumerable products on the marketplace. As such, the tactics used by government agencies ranged from inspecting products before distribution into the marketplace, mandating clear labels on products so consumers could make informed decisions, and finally to supporting consumers who had been purposefully deceived.228 Local and state governments supplemented direct national consumer protection actions by promoting consumer education curricula (as reviewed in Chapter 2) which attempted to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate a complicated marketplace.

Since the 1970s, there has been an emphasis on deregulation of marketplaces, including a reduction in consumer protection laws and enforcement,229 and reinterpretation of prior laws making the burden of proof for consumers more difficult in cases of deception and harm.230 It is

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worth quoting Titus and Bradford (1996) at length, as they summarize the underlying logic of declining governmental consumer protection. It should be noted that the term “social regulation” is used to mean any type of regulation that aims to reduce risk to consumers.

While free market conservatives endorsing the laissez-faire economic philosophy have conceded to some degree the need for economic regulation to facilitate fair competition (Amacher and Ulbrich, 1995), they argue that in a competitive marketplace social regulation is of little benefit (Friedman, 1981). Social market failures are believed to be kept in check via “consumer sovereignty,” that is, consumers redirecting their purchase behavior away from firms initiating such market failures. As a result, competing firms are compelled to correct the failure or exit the marketplace. Implicit is the assumption that consumers are sophisticated enough to make appropriate marketplace decisions, thereby reducing the need for social regulatory intervention by government (italics added for emphasis).

Under the new governing paradigm, the responsibility for consumer protection falls to consumers themselves, who are assumed to be knowledgeable enough to act in their own best interest. Indeed, Milton Friedman frequently discussed the inefficiencies of government-led consumer protection in his lectures of the 1970s and 1980s, and advocated for a scenario in which consumers are provided information on relative risks of a product (for example a new pharmaceutical drug) and decide for themselves whether the risks were justified. Friedman’s argument was largely utilitarian in nature because he acknowledged the possibility that some bad actors might produce misleading and harmful products, but in the long term consumers would avoid non-beneficial products and put bad actors out of business.

The political consequences of arguments like Friedman’s were decreased government regulation of producers and banks, but very little effort was made to improve information


available to consumers. If regulation on behalf of consumers should decline, one would expect that educational opportunities for consumers would increase. Ironically, as noted in prior chapters, the de-regulation politics of the 1970s and 1980s were accompanied by calls to increase education for global productive competiveness, meaning consumer education declined alongside regulation.

Financial Literacy as an Antidote

The financial crisis of 2008 and resulting recession can be seen as direct consequences of the dual trends of declining financial regulation (for example the repeal of the Glass-Steagel Act) and declining consumer education (for example in the number of individuals and families who were lured to overextend themselves in the housing market). For market rationalists in positions of power, an initial response was to call on educational institutions to return to consumer education and place particular emphasis on ‘financial literacy.’ For example, Chair of the Federal Reserve, Ben Bernake, gave a speech in the early stages of the Great Recession in support of financial literacy education as an antidote to future crises,

In light of the problems that have arisen in the subprime mortgage market, we are reminded of how critically important it is for individuals to become financially literate at an early age so that they are better prepared to make decisions and navigate an increasingly complex financial marketplace…I am personally convinced that improving education is vital to the future of our economy and all its citizens, and I strongly believe that promoting financial literacy, in particular, must be a high priority.233

The apparent convenience of shifting blame to a lack of education and misinformed consumers rather than financial de-regulation or financial policy is not merely ego-preserving, Bernake’s stance is indicative of the underlying neoclassical logic. Take another example from an

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economic policy advisor to President Clinton, Jonathan Orszag, who in 2007 argued against a bill imposing restrictions on credit card fees and interest rates and instead encouraged policies that increased disclosures to consumer and improved consumer education.\textsuperscript{234} His justification was grounded in defense of a freer market, believing fee restrictions would cause companies to stop lending to risky individuals and block their access to credit when they might need it. Bernake’s and Orszag’s logic in advocating for education is embedded in a firm belief that consumers, and not regulators, are in the best position to assess the cost and benefits of an economic transaction.

Such arguments have become boilerplate for companies and lobbyists seeking to block regulations. Indeed, it has pushed some financial services companies to back up their promotion of financial literacy by providing it themselves. For example, Bank of America runs the Better Money Habits education series in partnership with Khan Academy, a self-directed video learning platform popular with young students, so that individuals can self-educate on topics such as credit, retirement, saving, and taxes. Their tagline is “Let us help you prioritize what you want the power to do.”\textsuperscript{235} Similarly, Wells Fargo has developed the Hands on Banking series which they describe as “a free, non-commercial program that teaches people in various stages of life about the basics of responsible money management.”\textsuperscript{236} In addition to self-directed learning


\textsuperscript{235} Bank of America, retrieved January 12, 2020 from https://bettermoneyhabits.bankofamerica.com/en

\textsuperscript{236} Wells Fargo, retrieved January 12, 2020 from https://www.wellsfargo.com/about/corporate-responsibility/hands-on-banking/
materials, Wells Fargo offers pre-packaged curricular materials through the program designed to be used by teachers for a range of age groups. Whether these programs actually have educational efficacy or are more of a public relations effort is unclear. Given that the banking industry earned over $17 billion in revenue a year from overdraft and non-sufficient fund fees alone in 2015\textsuperscript{237}, or that Wells Fargo ran its ‘responsible money management’ program at the same time it fraudulently opened excess bank accounts in its customers’ names\textsuperscript{238}, suggests the public relations function is the true purpose.

The point here is that financial institutions, lobbyists, politicians, and policy wonks do not make arguments for financial institutions, or producers of goods or services, to limit products that are exploitative or harmful, or that are easier to understand, because to do so would be to argue against the profit motive which is the central driver of neoclassical economics and the purported efficiencies that benefit society. Instead, they argue for the empowerment of consumers through access to options and choice, and education to help evaluate those choices. It is unfortunate that the latter piece, consumer education, is emphasized during periods of intense market ‘distortions’ (ie recessions) and is attempted to be provided by financial institutions themselves who have ulterior motives rather than through a robust funding and support of non-profit and public sector initiatives to do so.

**Consumer Education as a ‘Public Good’ Appropriate for Public Schooling**


Purveyors of market rationalism advocate for government intervention and institutions only when the private sector cannot solve a problem itself, or when a good or service exists that would benefit all cannot successfully be provisioned by the market. In economics, these are called “public goods” which are defined as goods which can be used by anyone without reducing the satisfaction or utility of the goods by others (the principle of non-rivalry) and where it is not possible to exclude individuals from using the good (the principle of non-exclusivity). Common examples of public goods in economics are parks, national defense, and knowledge where often a determination is made to levy a tax to fund a government’s provision of such goods.

Many types of knowledge do produce private benefits, for example trade or professional skills which increase one’s income or financial literacy which improves one’s economic decision making, but as outlined previously these specializations and proficiencies can improve market efficiency which is by definition good for society collectively. Public schools are institutions developed specifically to provide the ‘public good’ of knowledge. While a market filled with private and for-profit schools could provide the same knowledge, such a market would not offer universal access or comparable quality creating an ‘externality’ where impoverished individuals would be underserved and further degrade their standing and resources relative to those who could afford access to schools. Many market rationalists have recognized this point, and concede that there must be universal access to schooling built into the law, but that public schooling could still be delivered by private institutions in a competitive market where a family consumer, using public funds, could choose the best educational options. Without getting into the relative merits or deficiencies of various voucher programs and charter school initiatives which follow this path using economic logic and neoclassical rationality, it stands to reason that if public funding is provisioned for schools (whether public or private) that that curriculum of such schools should
be required to, at least in part, educate students to become informed and rational actors if the ultimate goal is the improvement of economic efficiency.

**Conclusion**

Regardless of whether or not a person agrees with a market rationalist about the ability of markets to produce a high degree of general good in a society, the skills and knowledge that a market rationalist believes a consumer should have seem to be universally positive educational objectives. Let us consider two extreme cases for illustration. On one end, consider the consumer experience with utility companies such as gas, electric, and water – perhaps some of the most regulated, and expensive, services nearly all U.S. citizens will have to interact with on a monthly basis. When a consumer knows how to read a bill, compare service providers, plan for future expenses (higher costs in winter for example), lower costs, find and gather information on usage, determine the value of maintenance plans or warranties sold through utility companies, etc., this knowledge has incalculable value to the consumer personally and the market more broadly. Even in the limited choice scenario caused by the natural monopolies of utility providers, there are a host of reasons educated consumers would create efficiencies through reduced waste, protection from unexpected expenses, and advocacy for cheaper and cleaner sources of energy to name a few.

On the opposite end, consider a highly deregulated market such as clothing where sourcing, quality, and price are highly variable. In such a scenario there are so many options in terms of brands, materials, retailers that it is seemingly impossible to have complete information on what is available in the market. Further, pricing is purposefully manipulated and fluctuating to attract and entice customers – are the high quality, brand name jeans discounted from $80 to $35 a better value that the generic jeans that always cost $20? While it seems that no amount of
education could enable a person to navigate such overloaded and confusing markets, a well-educated, utility-maximizing consumer would still fare much better than an uninformed and undisciplined shopper. While all consumers may be disadvantaged in a complicated market, those armed with good heuristics for assessing quality and value, budgeting skills, and decision making skills will fare better than those who are not. And further, at the aggregate level, consumers opting for particular preferences such as lower cost or responsibly made products could push the market in positive directions.
CHAPTER 5: THE ENVIRONMENTAL ARGUMENT FOR CONSUMER EDUCATION

“\textit{I insist on the fact that there is generally no growth but only a luxurious squandering of energy in every form! The history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance; the dominant event is the development of luxury, the production of increasingly burdensome forms of life.}”
-George Bataille, 1949

Introduction

It is a longstanding trope that the United States, and the Western world writ large, is a consumer society.\textsuperscript{240} Recently, however, the purchasing power of middle and upper classes in the rest of the world have surpassed the United States; and as the economies of India and China rapidly grow, consumption in the East may overtake that in the West.\textsuperscript{241} Environmental researchers and social scientists concerned with the alarming rate of global warming and subsequent climate change have begun to take a close look at the unique role of consumer demand for things like meat, automobiles, plastics, clothing, and electronics plays in driving the global economic engine and associated environmental harm in the form of carbon output, pollution, and ecological destruction. A curb in the demand for goods, and especially carbon intensive goods, requires a change in consumer behavior. Recognizing this, education is seen to be an important mechanism for teaching individuals about how products and resources we consume impact the natural world. The first ever publication in the journal \textit{Environmental...


\textsuperscript{240} Garon, Sheldon. \textit{Beyond our means: Why America spends while the world saves}. (Princeton University Press, 2011).

Education emphasized this point about knowledge of ecological systems and the relationship to human activity. Subsequent environmental scholarship has emphasized critical reflection, experimentation, and action in curriculum and pedagogy. The current prevailing environmental education approach combines a formula of awareness and scientific thinking to lead the ultimate goal of modifying behaviors, especially consumptive behaviors, in students.

There are underlying philosophical and practical problems, however, with some of the efforts being advanced in the name of environmental health and sustainability at a global and local level which need attention. For instance, the definition of consumers and consumption is explicitly narrow, focusing on individualistic purchasing and ‘lifestyle’ choices and not on ‘producers’ who consume energy and resources into order to create new products or on politicians and institutions who set parameters and incentives for consumption. Other definitions in the field are equally ambiguous and contested, for example, what is meant when researchers advocate for ‘pro-environmental behaviors’ and what systems we are hoping to ‘sustain’ when pursuing a ‘sustainability mindset’. It is not the lack of clear definitions that is the problem when we look to translate environmental considerations into consumer education, but rather an inability to escape an anthropocentric, scientific, and instrumental view of nature embedded in our modern thinking and prevailing worldview. As noted in the introductory chapter, recent

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243 Gough, Annette. "The emergence of environmental education research." In International handbook of research on environmental education, eds. Stevenson, Robert; Brody, Michael; Dillon, Justin; Wals, Arjen. (Routledge, 2013).

environmentally and ecologically focused scholarship is now bringing eco-centric modes of thinking into diverse academic disciplines such as history, philosophy, the humanities, and the natural sciences. But this ‘green’ scholarship is by no means predominating academia and there are legitimate concerns as to whether ‘greenwashing’ institutions which are embedded in the scientific-commercial apparatus puts a glossy sheen on a fundamentally flawed system.\textsuperscript{245} Unless we look critically at who we are, what we claim to have knowledge of, how that knowledge is applied through technology, and the reasons why we expend effort on these pursuits; any efforts to incrementally or radically change human behavior will be in vain.

This chapter will provide a philosophical foundation for a consumer education which emphasizes the relation of students as consumers of resources in an interconnected ecological web. First I will explore the anthropocentric, human centered, perspective at the heart of the Western tradition and associated instrumentality of nature resulting from that view. I will then turn to three philosophers who have noted an exacerbation of this worldview in the modern era and who offer suggestions for reorienting our perspective. The first is George Bataille, who uses a historical review of cultural practices centered around energy consumption and waste to argue for a more encompassing ‘economic’ paradigm. The second is Martin Heidegger who elucidates the problems and paradoxes posed by modern scientific thinking and provides a vocabulary for considering existence in a more contingent and interconnected way.\textsuperscript{246} The final is Hans Jonas,\textsuperscript{245}

\textsuperscript{245} For a critique along these lines see Henderson, Joseph, David Hursh, and David Greenwood, eds. \textit{Neoliberalism and environmental education}. (Routledge, 2018).

\textsuperscript{246} It is worth noting that I am aware of Heidegger’s problematic relationship with the German Nazi party and his own personal anti-Semitic views. The reader will find that given the limitations of this study I do not grapple with these important issues, but rather draw from pieces of his work related to science, nature, and existential thinking which have practical implications for my overall goals. In this way I would rightly admit to the charge that I am using his own
who worries about the deterministic nature of technology on the human experience and seeks to
develop a framework for thinking more ethically and reflectively about the existential threats
posed by continued economic growth and technological development. Finally, I will juxtapose
these philosophical perspectives against contemporary strands of the modern environmental
movement and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the intention of
exposing contradictions in the suggested aims for educational practice. The ecological
framework for consumer education I outline below attempts to move beyond highlighting or
acknowledging the importance of the natural world in regard to human vitality, but rather places
the natural world as the central, foundational feature of all existence and consumption.

**Anthropocentricism and the Western Tradition**

Anthropocentricism is a term used to describe a perspective which puts humans at the
center of the world, where any non-human organism or material is judged in value on how well it
serves human interests. Recent decades have seen a surge of scholarship aimed at reevaluating
this historical relationship of humans with the natural environmental in both action and thought,
and have brought attention to the pervasiveness of anthropocentric thinking throughout time and
cultures. LaFrenier and Pointing are two enormous volumes which attempt to synthesize this
scholarship and provide a detailed account of anthropocentric philosophies and practices from
pre-history to the modern age. Both authors provide numerous examples of human-driven
environmental destruction; for example in the declines of the Sumerian and Mayan societies who

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work in an ‘instrumental’ way that he would probably disagree with, but such bracketing is
necessary otherwise it may not be possible to study the positive features of his work.

247 Pointing, C. *A New Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of
Great Civilizations*. (Random House, 2011); LaFreniere, Gilbert F. *The decline of nature:
overburdened their ecological foundations; altering the terrain for subsequent millennia in the case of Sumer, or causing complete social collapse in the case of the Maya. LaFrenier particularly highlights the anthropocentrism of ancient Greek society, which is recognized as providing the philosophical foundation for the modern Western world. Pythagoras put forward a conception of the soul which stated that the soul was eternal and distinct from an earthly body, and a worthwhile goal was the release of the soul from the material world. Plato, who borrowed from Pythagoras, also believed in an eternal soul. He postulated that things and objects in nature were not their true selves, but representations of an ideal form found in a higher ‘transcendental plane.’ Both these conceptions helped contribute to a devaluation of worldly experience and the significance of the material environment which brings humans into being. While Aristotle rejected Plato’s transcendental forms, he still proceeded in creating a ‘natural’ hierarchy of species with mankind residing atop.

The ideas of these ancient Greeks were fused during the Middle Ages by Christian scholars with Biblical imperatives for man to have “dominion” over the earth and shun any animistic religion which attributed spiritual value to living and non-living aspects of nature; establishing a “peculiarly Western disregard for the intrinsic value of nature”. As such an instrumental view of nature embedded European behavior for centuries, and the consequences can be seen today in the seemingly pastoral landscape which covers European terrain where forests, marshes, and meadows once thrived. As the scientific revolution of the Enlightenment

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248 LaFreniere, 84, paraphrasing Calicott (1989).

249 LaFreniere, 83, paraphrasing White (1967).
unfolded, this instrumentality grew and manifested in a mechanical and cold view of the natural world. Merchant writes,

The removal of animistic, organic assumptions about the cosmos constituted the death of nature—the most far-reaching effect of the Scientific Revolution. Because nature was now viewed as a system of dead, inert particles moved by external, rather than inherent forces, the mechanical framework itself could legitimate the manipulation of nature. Moreover, as a conceptual framework, the mechanical order had associated with it a framework of values based on power, fully compatible with the directions taken by commercial capitalism.²⁵⁰

Here we see that the scientific worldview was complimentary to the colonialism and capitalism that developed alongside it. If nature is nothing but resources to master for man’s purposes, concepts such as conquest and property become ascendant.

Not all individuals and cultures developed the pernicious anthropocentricism characteristic of the Western World. Hunter gathering societies tend to have a more symbiotic relationship with the ecosystems in which they reside.²⁵¹ Alaskan native cultures, for example, revere and respect the animal world, and acknowledge a successful hunt as a ‘gift’ bestowed by nature to humans. A study of one Alaskan people, the Yupiaq, found that our formalized concepts of ‘science’ are embedded in their culture and their understanding of the ecosystem, where all community members share in a body of knowledge, experiment and learn while immersed in the natural world. The authors illustrate, “To design a fish trap, for example, one must know how the river behaves, how the salmon behave, and how the split-willow of which


²⁵¹ Though this is not always the case, as there is a tremendous diversity in beliefs and practices amongst human cultures. For a good overview see: Berkes, Fikret. Sacred ecology. Routledge, 2012; or for a critical look Nadasdy, Paul. "Transcending the debate over the ecologically noble Indian: Indigenous peoples and environmentalism." Ethnohistory 52, no. 2 (2005): 291-331.
the trap is made behaves (i.e., one must have an understanding of physics, biology, and engineering).”252 While all human activities are anthropocentric to some degree, in that our perpetuation requires extracting food and resources from the natural environment, the perspective embodied in philosophies like that of Yupiaq encourage a systematic perspective which considers each species’ place in a relational ecosystem and attributes intrinsic worth to non-human beings.

Technological developments and efficiencies in modern societies give the perception of biological separation from the natural environment, but ecologists and environmentalists are trying to remind us that we our lives are no less contingent. And as will be discussed further, the seemingly evolutionary progression of energy harnessing which has markedly improved the material wellbeing of humankind has meant annihilation for many other species and poses the possibility of annihilation for humans themselves. From a historical perspective, scholars have noted that the decline of major civilizations has been the result of direct or indirect impacts societies have had on their ecosystems. Summarizing what might be the philosophical underpinning of human caused ecological failures, Pointing writes,

Instead of seeing the environment as the foundation of human history, settled societies, especially modern industrial societies, have acted under the illusion that they are somehow independent from the natural world, which they have generally preferred to see as something apart which they can exploit more or less with impunity. Ever since the first great transition which began 10,000 years ago, and particularly in the last two centuries, humans have put increasing pressure on the earth’s environment – in defiance of basic ecological principles.253


Below I examine three twentieth century philosophers who can be used to conceptualize this underlying problem, by explicitly challenging human/nature/environment distinctions and problematizing the instrumental perspective of the natural resources in order promote a more interconnected and relational view of the environment.

**George Bataille and the Consumption of Energy as Fundamental to Human Societies**

Energy is the most significant feature of our universe. It is the force that animates and undergirds the natural environment and complex exchanges of the ecosystem. It is no coincidence that Dewey began *Democracy and Education* by identifying energy, and the attempt of lifeforms to harness it, as a starting point to consider human relations, communication, and learning. Evolutionary biologists and psychologists underscore how the human species thrived on its ability to use cooperation (coordinated energy) to exploit environmental resources. Language became the key tool for humans because it not only improved cooperation, but allowed for intergenerational learning and improvement of skills. Seen from this perspective, that energy consumed by an organism and its predecessors over time becomes captured in the very structures of that organism’s being, and more impressively for humans, memory and intergenerational learning allow for the energy that was taken to learn one lesson to not be expended to learn the lesson again. Physical tools that have durability enhance this process, using one form of energy expenditure (tool making) can have multiplicative effects on the capture of energy from the environment (improved hunting through weapon making or food

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storage through pottery). The development of cultural practices and the growth of civilizations are dependent upon this energy capture and manipulation.

George’s Bataille’s *The Accursed Share* (1949) is an attempt to step backward to broadly consider this energy ecosystem and examine humankind through the cultural practices which expend excess energy gathered from the environment. Like contemporaries Hans Jonas and Hannah Arendt, Bataille wrote at a time of existential concern posed by nuclear destruction, and indeed the contestation of the Cold War and its associated expenditures of resources factor heavily into his study. The stated aim of Bataille’s book is ambitious: to examine the “general economy” of human beings, by which he means the totality of productive and consumptive activities of human beings represented by the capture, use, and destruction of energy. Bataille calls his study a type of “political economy” in that it looks to the institutions, practices, and mechanisms of power that direct the use of this energy, acknowledging that while his study utilizes historical, economic, and anthropological lenses it does not fall neatly into any such categories. Studying the totality of human activity inherently calls for a broader approach.

Bataille delineates between productive human activities that build lasting products from activities that are intended for consumption of energy. Bataille writes, “When one considers

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257 For a detailed discussion on the ability of humans to make the world more ‘habitable’ and reduce the need for labor through the production of lasting shelter, tools, and other products see Hannah Arendt’s description of *homo faber* in *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).


259 For an analogous delineation, with more thorough analysis, see Arendt’s concept of “work” and “labor” in Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. (University of Chicago Press, 2013).
the totalité of productive wealth on the surface of the globe, it is evident that the products of his wealth can be employed for productive ends insofar as the living organism that is economic mankind can increase its equipment. This is not entirely – neither always or indefinitely – possible”.

The emphasis for Bataille is on the amount of energy humans have accumulated from the biosphere in the form of food and fuel (productive wealth) because, as subject to the laws of physics, this energy must be exerted as the means of storing it are limited.

It is this conception of energy underlying his thesis: the defining activities of a society and culture are not what would traditionally be considered productive (the means by which it acquires wealth) but rather the activities that are consumptive (the means by which it utilizes and destroys wealth). Acknowledging his view goes up against the prevailing paradigm of economics he writes,

Minds accustomed to seeing the development of productive forces as the ideal end of activity refuse to recognize that energy which constitutes wealth, must ultimately be spent lavishly (without return), and that a series of profitable operations has absolutely no other effect than the squandering of profits. To affirm that is necessary to dissipate a substantial portion of energy produced, sending it up in smoke, is to go against judgements that form the bases of a rational economy.

Indeed, the majority of Bataille’s book is spent examining societies throughout history that have developed complicated, elaborate, and dynamic cultural institutions and practices to expend excess energy. He juxtaposes societies throughout history who are defined by practices of expenditure: lavish ceremonies of the Aztecs where prisoners were gorged with elaborate feasts and then sacrificed; ceremonial potlatch of the Native American northwest where rank and prestige were conferred to those who gave away the most to others; early militant Islam where all

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260 Bataille, 22, emphases in original.

261 Bataille, 22.
excess energy were directed to conquest and growth; the development of Tibetan Buddhism where an entire society’s wealth maintained an ‘idle’ monastic state; the growth of Soviet industrialization where wealth was directed toward the “ruthless” accumulation of productive forces, and finally the capitalist Marshall Plan whereby the United States conferred hundreds of billions of dollars to foreign nations without the expectation of an economic return (though with expectation of a hegemonic deference). Bataille carefully observes the actions, behaviors, and practices undertaken by groups in these societies, rather than their stated beliefs, because he believes those actions are governed by the systems and institutions established for expending energy. He writes, “A social behavior cannot result from a moral rule; it expresses the structure of a society, a play of material forces that animates it”.

The paradigmatic significance of Bataille’s study in *The Accursed Share* cannot be overstated. Preceding similar arguments that have been made in environmental sciences by decades, Bataille’s argument understands 1) that human societies are immersed in dynamic systems of energy 2) societies, like any other grouping of matter in the physical universe, are subject to the laws of physics where energy cannot be created or destroyed, only manipulated, stored, or expended. Furthermore, as societies are enabled through technologies to capture and extract more and more energy from the natural environment, Bataille’s theory accounts for the transition of industrialized societies from emphasizing manufacturing and efficient transformation of raw materials, to now emphasizing the ‘service’ sector and the development of non-essential consumer products, entertainment, and digital communications. In the new cultural

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262 Bataille, 159.

263 Bataille, 105.
regime of global capitalism, we see a proliferation of multiple mechanisms for inflating demand through advertising and creatively expending excess energy. Bataille reminds us that consumption and expenditure are not so neatly distinguished and, in fact, a society’s consumptive practices often direct and structure its institutions and politics.

**Martin Heidegger and Existential Contingency**

The most outstanding feature of Martin Heidegger’s philosophy is its ontological emphasis. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics* lecture (1935), he argues for the centrality of the question of “why is there being rather than nothing?” and its relation to the concept of ‘dasein’. Dasein is a German word that remains untranslated in Heidegger’s works because it is not meant to convey ordinary use—his intent was to emphasize ‘da’ meaning ‘here’ and ‘sein’ meaning ‘being’, in order to express that we are beings who can consider and recognize their conscious place in time (as opposed to an animal who may have ‘sein’ but no sense of a ‘da’). Heidegger’s examination of being is propelled by his insistence that the modern world uses the term ‘being’ as “an empty word and evanescent vapor.” He labels this as a “dangerous” practice as it means our society occupies the world and commands its resources without any deep sense or appreciation for the meaning of this existence.

According to Harman, Heidegger, inspired by his mentor Husserl, recognized that both philosophy and the sciences followed in the Aristotelian tradition of categorizing and analyzing objects while failing to recognize that those objects exist in a defined time and space and in relation to other things. Summarizing Heidegger succinctly, “Things are not objects: instead,

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they have significance, which means that they belong to a system of relations with other things in the environment”\textsuperscript{266}. In other words, humans have gotten better at collecting isolated knowledge, but no better at understanding the meaning and impact of our existence.

Heideggerian thinking is especially applicable to two of the most prominent concerns facing humanity – the automation of ‘intelligence’ and the destruction of our ecosystems. Heidegger encouraged us to look at our everyday practices to see that knowledge was embedded in what we do, but our active being within them was not reducible to the ‘facts’ we could explicitly describe about those practices. One strong example is the act of driving a car. We engage in this activity without considering the technology we are using, without fully understanding the mechanisms that propel us forward, without explicitly thinking out the steps in our brain of handling the wheel, applying the brake, reading road sign etc. – we just drive the car as if it were natural. Yet the car’s very existence, and our ability to drive it about a system of roads in coordination with thousands of others, is geographically and historically contingent, and our intellectual development to operate in this environment is highly interactive and social. Of course engineers and software programmers can mimic, and in some cases exceed, the neural processes and motor functions necessary to complete any one of these independent driving functions – and we are in the beginning stages of the replication which are now safe enough for automated vehicles to be used on public roadways. For Heidegger, the intelligence produced in this example does not approach dasein – the automated vehicle carries out specific tasks and does not design and build new roadways to be explored, it does not re-form itself to use new forms of fuel, it does not decide on a course of action other than what it is designed to do. As such, the efforts of humans to invent new technologies to occupy our time and use our resources

\textsuperscript{266} Harman, 29.
to fill our lives with objects only exaggerates our lack of metaphysical awareness – that we are radically vulnerable and contingent.\textsuperscript{267}

Heidegger characterized modern science as reducible to the mere accumulation of knowledge in contrast to his idea of science a more active process “directed ahead toward possibilities it cannot yet full grasp or articulate”.\textsuperscript{268} This characterization accurately pre-dates the ascendance of ‘data’ which has become a form of currency to be mass harvested and analyzed, giving ‘insights’ into behaviors bound within the limits of carefully constructed technological platforms. He argued we are living in a system of empty signifiers, where a thing’s abstract label has completely untethered from its existential meaning.\textsuperscript{269} Heidegger’s distinction between things that are objects to be used and things which exist in meaningful relation to other beings is an extremely significant premise when applied to environmental philosophy. As Zimmerman notes,

Heidegger can be viewed as a forerunner of deep ecology because he called for a “higher humanism” that would lead beyond the anthropocentric, dualistic humanism associated with dominating nature and make possible authentic ways of “dwelling” compatible with “letting things be”.\textsuperscript{270}

\textsuperscript{267} In one of his late lectures, when asked how a person can live an authentic life, Heidegger responded by saying “by spending more time in graveyards” Wilson, Hope. “How Can We Live Authentic Lives.” What Philosophy Can Tell Us About Everyday Life series (Penn State University, 2015). Retrieved March 22, 2019 from https://sites.psu.edu/philosophyandeverydaylife/2015/09/18/post-2-how-can-we-live-authentic-lives-heidegger/


\textsuperscript{269} Jean Baudrillard would later expand on the discrepancies between symbolic and material or practical worth, calling it the “hyperreal” state of the modern world. Baudrillard, Jean. Symbolic exchange and death. (Sage, 2016).

In this conception, humans recognize their situated dependence on known and unknown resources in the environment, and efforts to control or master that environment (and disassociated data drawn from it) only further isolate humans from the very sources of their being.

Heidegger offers two suggestions for building this sense of being-with and overcoming the disassociated, modern worldview through historicity and striving. By studying and appreciating our relation to predecessors through history, he suggests we can at least acknowledge the contingency of a given moment and use that awareness as a guide. In regards to everyday consumer and economic choices, this prescription does not call for a radical change in our behavior or development of a unique philosophy, just fully coming to terms with our place in the chain of history and the contingency of the choices available to us. “In this sense, the personal choices of the authentic individual are never original; they are never our own. The possibilities for our decisions and actions are always already socially constituted, through the language, public practices, and cultural institutions that we grow into as historical beings.”

With this recognition when we go into the world, it is not important for us to strive for a morally pure or complete understanding before action because it would be impossible to develop one. Instead, we are to strive for an authentic existence and reflection in community with others to fully develop our dasein.

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Hans Jonas on Environmental and Technological Ethics

Hans Jonas was a student of Martin Heidegger and heavily influenced by his ideas, in particular humankind’s ontological relationship to the natural world and our increasing capacity to manipulate it. Jonas was deeply interested in ecological relationships and moral significance of living beings. He called the metabolic process the first and most fundamental form of freedom because metabolism, not simply a biological term, is ontologically significant in separating beings from non-beings. For Jonas, the notion that organisms live in a dynamic relationship with their environment, and that more complex organisms have greater ability to capture and manipulate energy their ecosystems, creates the foundation for thinking about ethical responsibility. Hauskeller, summarizing Jonas’ evolutionary perspective writes, “That is why feeling and perceiving animals strive to preserve themselves as feeling and perceiving entities, and why as humans, we do not merely want to go on existing, or digesting, but also to keep sensing and thinking and making choices.” Importantly, while humans may be unique in their ability to consciously and reflectively manipulate the environment, these behaviors are underpinned by the same ontological contingency of all other living beings.

Unlike Heidegger, who spent most of his career studying the nature and meaning of existence, Jonas was primarily focused on ethics (grounded in an ecological ontological orientation) and articulating how humans should act in the world. In The Imperative of Responsibility, Jonas identifies several flaws with traditional ethical models, that the nonhuman


realm was not considered, that the idea of “man” is static (that man does not change with changes in the biological and built environment), and that the time scale for considering consequences is almost exclusively short term (ethics does not deal with long-term, unforeseen consequences, and does not deal with future generations). As such, he attempted to develop a philosophical approach for considering questions of bioethics and technology, and was prescient in declaring that technological development could run the risk of outperforming its own good – with the primary concerns that technology could automate our livelihoods out of existence or that it could create negative environmental damage on an unrecoverable scale. Given such pressing and existential concerns, he proposed that philosophy must provide ethical grounds to describe such problems because other sciences and disciplines lack a common language. He wrote, “the philosopher must try for normative knowledge, and if his labors fall predictably short of producing a compelling axiomatics, at least his clarifications can counteract rashness and make people pause for a thoughtful view”. For Jonas, a reengagement of philosophy with questions of technological implications has the benefit of not getting bogged down in traditional philosophical quandaries, like evaluating competing conceptions of ‘the good’, but could be couched in the “pretheoretical, instinctive, and universal” concern that we want to survive and that we want to perpetuate life for future generations.

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Jonas, living at the advent of the digital age, extended Heidegger’s critique of isolated knowledge, science, and technology which tends to exist as an ends onto itself. Referring to the rising computing industry he writes,

The world they help to constitute and which needs computers for its very running is no longer nature supplemented, imitated, improved, transformed, the original habitat made more habitable. In the pervasive mentalization of physical relation-ships it is a trans-nature of human making, but with this inherent paradox: that it threatens the obsolescence of man himself, as increasing automation ousts him from the places of work where he formerly proved his humanhood. And there is a further threat: its strain on nature herself may reach a breaking point.²⁷⁷

In this passage, Jonas underscores that technologies often create new ‘wants’ and ‘needs’ that previous generations were oblivious to, without any sort of fundamental concern for the relationship with the natural world. Humans believe these technologies take us beyond a dependency on nature without recognizing they simultaneously undermine the habitability of the planet and our ability to understand their impact on human freedom. Jonas comments and reflects on the situation, “Man may have become more powerful; men very probably the opposite, enmeshed as they are in more dependencies than ever before” caught up in a “pathology” of “compulsions”, “I seriously wonder whether the tyranny of fate has not become greater, the latitude of spontaneity smaller; and whether man has not actually been weakened in his decision-making capacity by his accretion of collective strength”.²⁷⁸ In this view, technological improvement does not simply give a more efficient means for meeting our needs, it develops a deterministic quality, interacting with our cultural and psychological values, to compel and constrain our everyday lives while limiting our holistic understanding.

²⁷⁷ Jonas, Toward a philosophy of technology, 40.

²⁷⁸ Jonas, 42.
The quandaries of this relationship between humans and technologies, which seem to have increasingly deterministic influences on our decision making and on the natural environment, present to Jonas the “novel moral problem” of our time.279

Knowledge, under these circumstance, becomes a prime duty beyond anything claimed for it heretofore, and the knowledge must be commensurate with the causal scale of our action. The fact that it cannot really be thus commensurate, that is, that the predictive knowledge falls behind the technical knowledge that nourishes our power to act, itself assumes ethical importance.280

In response to this problem, Jonas proposes a new Kantian imperative, to “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life.”281 Obviously, given the resource intensive nature of modern lifestyles, Jonas acknowledges this imperative lends itself to a more ascetic lifestyle (or what we might now refer to as a “minimalist” lifestyle).282 Jonas explicitly mentions education as means to influence our “consumptive habits” and “make a certain frugality, a greater modesty, part of the social climate.”283 While individual changes might be necessary, they are not sufficient, and the state must play an important role in representing the needs of future generation and modifying actions of individuals now to ensure that future. Recognizing that his imperative could lend itself to authoritarian and dystopian attempts at behavior modification (for example he predicts governmental institutions

279 Jonas and Herr, The Imperative of Responsibility, 8.

280 Jonas and Herr, 8.

281 Jonas and Herr, 11.

282 Jonas and Herr, 14.

increasingly using pharmaceutical drugs to help people be more ‘manageable’ in places like schools and hospitals), he says that we should avoid “taking away the dignity of personal selfhood” and instead focus on the development of responsible individuals in combination with more long term policy making.\(^{284}\) Importantly, Jonas says that before questions of this proper balance of individual rights and the enforcement of future oriented policies can be answered, we must address “the question of what insight or value-knowledge will represent the future in the present.”\(^{285}\)

**Applying Bataille, Heidegger, and Jonas to Modern Environmental and Sustainability Education**

Bataille, synthesized with Heidegger and Jonas, provides a profound philosophical and cultural understanding of human society, especially in relation to the natural world. Our science and technology, preceding independently and abstracted from the environment, increase our capacity to control and manipulate energy while simultaneously inventing new mechanisms to ‘exuberantly’ expend that energy. This science exists within, and is driven by, a culture whose goal has never been to live harmoniously and efficiently within any given natural limits. As David Harvey has observed, the capitalist system is fundamentally structured to push beyond spatial, social, and ecological limits by creating new markets and products,\(^{286}\) so that any potential excess accumulation that might have been ‘saved’ is ‘re-invested’ into exponential expansion.

\(^{284}\) Jonas and Herr, 20.

\(^{285}\) Jonas and Herr, 22, emphasis in original.

\(^{286}\) Harvey, David. *The limits to capital*. (Verso books, 2018).
Examples of Heideggarian thinking, and the modern mindset he so fervently critiqued, are evident in the current struggle between ‘environmental education’ and ‘sustainable development’ paradigms. While both paradigms have seen increased attention from scholars in recent decades as concerns about climate change grow, the sustainable development model has been widely adopted in educational institutions as well as in major government, corporate, and non-profit initiatives, typified by the U.N.’s establishment of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the associated Global Compact which has thousands of public and private signatories committing to the SDGs. Generally, environmental education (EE) literature has promoted a conception of the environment as an intrinsically valuable experience to be appreciated and enjoyed, as a resource to be protected and carefully utilized, as a habitat and ecosystem in which to reside and interact with. Though EE advocates do not typically use Heidegger, their emphasis on being in, and appreciating, the natural world echo Heidegger’s dasein which “does not mean simply observing or thinking about a world of objects of cognition, but rather, it means going about our business actively, practically, as we strive to live out some meaningful way of life.” Further, across EE conceptions there is a general balance between instrumental and non-instrumental views of nature; i.e. there is room for non-anthropocentric philosophies and practices.


This contrasts with various sustainable development (SD) paradigms, which all to some degree emphasize how nature and natural resources should be used for human benefit. To give a general summary, a SD advocate would argue that the best way to improve conditions for substantial portions of the human population, suffering from a lack of resources and not fully included in the industrial development of the last two hundred years, is through the wise use of environmental resources to advance infrastructure, lower the cost of necessities and services, and increase opportunities for personal and community growth. There are many conceptual approaches to SD, but an underlying feature of all is implied in the name, ‘sustainable’ where an activity or activities can be perpetuated and ‘development’ where progress and growth are made explicit. For example, the U.N. writes, “The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)… recognize that ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic growth and addresses a range of social needs including education, health, social protection, and job opportunities, while tackling climate change and environmental protection.”

At their core, the goals suggest that cooperation, mixed with the right amount of knowledge, technical capacity, and resources, can solve the world’s biggest problems. Heidegger would point to a glaring problems with this SD perspective, in that it attempts to marshal the scientific/technological apparatus to solve problems which that apparatus caused. Cooper summarizes Heidegger’s position,

...scientific research and technology share a similar 'mind-set'. Both the researcher and the technologist put nature on the rack, in the Baconian spirit; both demand that nature yield something up. That in the one case, the yield is quantified information acquired under experimental conditions while, in the other, it is coal, electricity or whatever in satisfaction of practical wants, should not be allowed to conceal the affinity.

290 United Nations, 2016, para. 3.

The SD model expects similarly for nature to meet all of humanity’s demands, and implies continued pushing for technology to deliver on that promise. Heidegger pointed out that there are other possible stances toward the natural world, which let nature ‘be’ and not continually viewed as a “standing reserve” of resources.\(^{292}\) Indeed, Jonas and current critics of SD observe that for sustainability to actually exist it will require a reduction in economic activity, and consumption, for wealthier parts of the world.\(^{293}\)

Of particular relevance to consumer education is SDG 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns. This SDG calls for “educating consumers on sustainable consumption and lifestyles, providing them with adequate information through standards and labels” and wants to “ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature.”\(^{294}\) Immediately evident in this text is that “sustainable lifestyle” and being “in harmony with nature” are not only ambiguous concepts, but an individualistic informational-deficit model is put forth where with explicit implications – if people have more data they will act more sustainably. Fundamentally this vision is not about changing the kind of people we are or the perspectives we have (i.e. it does not have ontological or metaphysical objectives), but instead rests on the assertion that “awareness” leads to changes in behaviors. The SDG view is problematic both because it has


been disproven through empirical research as an effective educational strategy, and because it is superficial and inaccurate in a Heideggerian sense. In analyzing Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, Heidegger wrote that there is a normative desire within the dark ignorance of the cave to achieve ‘astuteness’, but that “astuteness is not the same thing as possessing knowledge.” Instead he suggests “real education lays hold of the soul itself and transforms it in its entirety by first of all leading us to the place of our essential being and accustoming us to it.” He elaborates on this process as a type of active journey, where liberated from myopic perspectives, one seeks out new experiences in order to interact with, and reveal, the full nature of one’s existence. Importantly, the experiences Heidegger wants people to seek are not individualistic, as Aho summarizes, “human beings are never isolated subjects, separate and distinct from the public world. Structured by being-in-the-world, we are always already ‘being-with’ others, and others exercise an elemental control over us.”

The more holisitic, and non-intstrumental environment education paradigm is not without its own weaknesses. For example, Jonas’ concern about the weakened capacity of

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295 In a now famous 1990 environmental education article, Hungerford and Volk explicitly argued “issue awareness does not lead to behavior in the environmental dimension” and argued alternatively for an investigative and action-oriented curricular model. Hungerford, Harold R., and Trudi L. Volk. "Changing learner behavior through environmental education." The journal of environmental education 21, no. 3 (1990): 8-21, 18. Kollmuss and Agyeman buttressed this line of reasoning with empirical investigations into the information-deficit models by demonstrating a significant gap exists between people’s knowledge and behaviors, noting that human behavior is extremely difficult to change and is often dissonant with knowledge. Kollmuss, Anja, and Julian Agyeman, 2002. "Mind the gap: why do people act environmentally and what are the barriers to pro-environmental behavior?." Environmental education research 8, no. 3 (2002), 239-260.


humans to maintain thoughtful and reflective practices in the face of increasingly omnipresent technological influences seems underaddressed. The EE literature, which took a behavior modification turn in recent decades in response to the failures of the information deficit model (like the one promoted by the U.N. SDGs), now focuses on developing “pro-environmental behavior”. A popular study in this vein defines the term as “behavior that consciously seeks to minimize the negative impact of one’s actions on the natural and built world (e.g. minimize resource and energy consumption, use of non-toxic substances, reduce waste production).”

Significantly, each example they provide is one that relates to consumption. Yet worryingly, the behaviors described are individualistic, the pro-environmental behavior is about “one’s actions” not a community’s actions or humanity’s actions, and are reductive or restrictive, where the goal is to reduce and minimize bad behavior rather than promote or produce positive behavior. This glaring problem is echoed in other research, which states that the goal of environmental education is to enable a person to strive toward a more ecological “lifestyle” where attention is paid to educational interventions and the meaning of pro-environmental behaviors or lifestyles are individualistic and undertheorized. To Jonas’ point about how technology alters our behaviors an thinking, would a person who was educated to understand the negative environmental costs associated with using a smart phone (for example that it is built using minerals from exploitative mining operations, made of parts that are difficult to recycle and safely reenter the environment, or its use of energy locally for its performance and globally in

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298. Kollmuss, Anja, and Julian Agyeman. "Mind the Gap: Why Do People Act Environmentally and What Are the Barriers to Pro-Environmental Behavior?". *Environmental education research* 8, no. 3 (2002), 239-60, 240

data storage ‘cloud’ facilities, etc.) actually have the capacity to refrain from using a phone if everyone else in their social network used one? And as that smart phone reorients those very same social relations that drew one into using the technology, when do the users become aware that the device which was meant to serve their interests is now shaping their behaviors in the technology company’s interests? Finally, because Jonas was keenly aware that State intervention was necessary, in combination with individual lifestyle changes, we must ask the question of how students learn about the impact of government and corporate policy and how citizens might intervene to force the recognition of interest for the environment and future generations.

Conclusion

Returning to Democracy and Education, where Dewey posits biological processes as a pre-condition for human society, culture, and communication, the ecological paradigm emphasizes how the human interpersonal experience shapes our relationship with the natural world, not as a pre-condition, but a continuous feedback loop. Just as Dewey went on to describe that learning was not the result of communication, but rather learning occurred “in communication” emphasizing a continual process of exchange, so too would an ecologist not describe human civilization as the result of resource extraction from the natural world, but as existing in nature. This is the line, between anthropocentrism and biocentrism, that Jonas’ ethic asks us to walk. This is echoed more recently by theorists looking at environmental

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300 For an in depth look at the issue of corporations using phones and the applications run on them to purposefully alter the users psychology and behaviors, see the film The Social Dilemma, directed by Jeff Orlowski (Boulder, CO: Exposure Labs, 2020). Released on Netflix.

education and sustainable development education paradigms. For example, Kopnina argues that while some SD conceptions have become overly anthropocentric, what matters is not the framework being used, but the instrumental outcome of the educational intervention – i.e. are we educating individuals who want to protect, and can protect, the environment from irreversible damage. More broadly we might say that environmental education and sustainable development literature are successful when they enable students to think about values and responsibilities and how to act as responsible people.\(^{302}\)

Compared with the civic frame which emphasizes the relationships of the public to the state and intermediary institutions; the economic frame which emphasizes responsibility for one’s market choices and personal finances; a cursory look at the environmental frame emphasizes responsibility to the ecosystem and future generations. However, if our environmental frame truly emphasizes systems thinking, it elicits a broader conception more closely related to Bataille’s general economy where social, economic, and environmental considerations overlap significantly. Consuming is not the only act that cuts across these fields of responsibility but it is the most engrained, pervasive, and frequently engaged starting point; especially if we view “productive” enterprises such as manufacturing and digitization as the active consumption of materials and energy drawn from the ecosystem.

Connecting the ontological and epistemological concerns identified by Heidegger and Jonas we find philosophical support for environmental education generally, and the content and pedagogy of environmental education specifically. A fundamental task of any authentic educational effort must be to spark an awareness and curiosity of the place of human in the larger sphere of existence. Environmental education and its emphasis on ecological systems,

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connectedness, and dependencies can elucidate this awareness both empirically and philosophically. Jonas, specifically, identified an awareness of the scope of human impact as compelling a new categorical imperative to “act so that the effect of your actions are not destructive of the future possibility of such life“⁵⁰³ where we come to recognize that “the common destiny of man and nature” are one in the same and that we “rediscover nature’s own dignity which commands us to care for her integrity over and above the utilitarian aspect.”⁵⁰⁴

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⁵⁰³ Jonas and Herr, 11

CHAPTER 6: TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF PUBLIC CONSUMER EDUCATION

Introduction

This study opened by calling attention to the decline of consumer education efforts in public educational institutions in the United States, especially in light of pressing ecological concerns. I situated this decline of consumer education in the context of increasingly career-oriented school system which seems to be neglecting issues of social and ecological concern. In Chapter 2, I conducted a historical review of consumer education in order to clarify what consumer education variants have been offered in public schools in the past and how schools and the public justified these offerings. My research revealed that consumer education was a place where issues of public concern were addressed, though in often narrow, gendered, and racialized ways.

Seeking to re-orient and broaden our understanding of consumption, I explored the topic through civic, economic, and environment lenses and discussed educational implications drawn from each perspective. In Chapter 3, I focused on how information dissemination, consumption, and analysis occur in a society has enormous consequences the democratic process of network formation and the application of pressure on the state. In Chapter 4, I explored foundational tenets of the paradigm dominating public policy spheres, neoclassical economics, and the role of informed and rational consumers play in promoting efficient markets which, in theory, lead to positive societal outcomes. In Chapter 5, I presented philosophers which challenged an anthropocentric worldview and encouraged a reconceptualization of consumptive relationships with the biosphere. In this final chapter, I will explicate and the relationship of these three perspectives so that a person seeking to reconceive consumer education can address each of them in a non-contradictory way.
Following this synthesis, I will argue that educational institutions have the potential to be effective intermediaries between the public and the state if they adopt the role of engaged institutions, recognizing the role they play as consumers of resources and co-creators of knowledge. Using the engaged paradigm, educational institutions can focus on curriculum and pedagogy that promotes conscious consumption and scientific experimentation. The consumer education proposed will emphasize developing in students their capacity for discernment and agency and its success will be dependent on how well I can integrate civic, economic, and environmental frameworks into a holistic approach. While the goal of this study was not to provide specific curricular prescriptions for consumer education, I will suggest some helpful heuristics educators and educational institutions could use to begin to re-incorporate consumer education in various disciplines or to re-establish it as its own formal area of study.

**Integrating the Civic, Economic, and Environmental Perspectives**

One of the most outstanding concerns to address is the tension between individualistic and social goals discussed in the civic, economic, and environmental frameworks. Specifically, the economic framework argues that aggregate social good is achieved through individuals pursuing self-interested objectives. Similarly, some sustainability perspectives make this case when focusing on individual consumer choices which, in aggregate, can make positive environmental impacts. When individual choices and actions are the sole focus, however, it obscures large scale problems that the individual might not be aware of, is unable to address, or refuses to address. These include market ‘externalities’ such as pollution or ‘tragedy of the commons’ scenarios where the self-interested actions of many erode the availability of limited resources for all. As explained in Chapter 4, consumers are typically at an information deficit in economic marketplaces, but that markets would be more efficient if this were not the case.
Dewey’s paradigm, investigated in Chapter 3, helps bridge this gap between the individual knowledge and social action. His theory of public formation is grounded in the notion that individuals might have shared interests, and improving the frequency and quality of communications amongst them will help them increase their social bonds and their ability to exert influence. While Dewey is primarily focused on the ways in which these publics influence the state, and thus laws and policy, there is no reason to assume that publics cannot similarly influence pressure on corporate actors.

There are historical examples of companies changing practices in the face of consumer pressure, for example in the 1965-1970 Grape Boycott initiated by California farm workers to address issues of low-pay and unsafe working conditions, and in the 1980s when Nestle was pressured to stop the marketing of unhealthy baby formulas in third world countries after medical and health groups sounded the alarm. In both of these examples, the effort and information provided by an initial concerned public (the farm workers or public health experts) animated concern amongst consumers, who formed larger publics and drew negative attention (and the threat of lower profitability) to the companies involved. Importantly, through these examples we see that individual choices in the marketplace do not have to exist in isolation. When combined with awareness and knowledge of how a product’s creation intersects with one’s personal values the ‘self-interested’ decision of what to buy (or not buy) can be driven by economic and ethical dimensions and will always have a socially-constituted element. The role of educational

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institutions and consumer education in illuminating and strengthening this process will be
returned to later in this chapter.

The second tension to address between the three frameworks laid out in this study is the
tension between anthropocentric vs. non-anthropocentric worldviews outlined in Chapter 5. At
the individual level there may be alignment between anthropocentric interests and sustainability
interests, for example by purchasing a home solar system that yields long term financial benefits
to the user and lowers one’s carbon footprint. But individual consumer economic and
environmental interests can also come into conflict, for example when organic, sustainably
produced foods cost more for individuals on limited budgets than purchasing ‘standard’
alternatives. Similar convergences and divergences of interest between human and
environmental consequences arise at a larger scale, for instance when renewable industry growth
creates new job opportunities, or where some industries profit explicitly on environmental
destruction and find cost savings in cutting environmental corners.

Returning to the desire laid out in the introductory chapter to seek a broader philosophical
perspective when two objectives seem in conflict, one suggestion would be to investigate or
reveal how environmentally harmful, yet economically profitable ventures, actually carry
individual and aggregate economic costs to consumers and society. There are financial costs that
come in the form increased risks of cancer and higher prevalence of lung diseases,\(^\text{306}\) increased

\(^{306}\) Moore, Justin Xavier, Tomi Akinyemiju, and Henry E. Wang. "Pollution and regional
variations of lung cancer mortality in the United States." *Cancer epidemiology* 49 (2017), 118-
127; Simkovich, Suzanne M., Dina Goodman, Christian Roa, Mary E. Crocker, Gonzalo E.
Gianella, Bruce J. Kirenga, Robert A. Wise, and William Checkley, "The health and social
implications of household air pollution and respiratory diseases." *NPJ primary care respiratory
exposure of severe weather and catastrophic natural disasters,\footnote{Ummenhofer, Caroline C., and Gerald A. Meehl. "Extreme weather and climate events with ecological relevance: a review." \textit{Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences} 372, no. 1723 (2017).} and increased costs of consumer goods when the natural resources needed to provide them are not sustainably managed.\footnote{For example, the rising price of fish as species populations decline Quaas, Martin F., and Till Requate. "Sushi or fish fingers? Seafood diversity, collapsing fish stocks, and multispecies fishery management." \textit{The Scandinavian Journal of Economics} 115, no. 2 (2013): 381-422.} Indeed there is a push in both the public policy sector to account for these costs through taxes\footnote{Scharff, Erin Adele. "Green Fees: The Challenge of Pricing Externalities under State Law." \textit{Nebraska Law Review} 97, no. 1 (2018).} for example in the form of a carbon taxes or pollution run-off fees, and in the corporate sector where some companies seeking to be more “socially responsible” are implementing “triple-bottom line” accounting.\footnote{Slaper, Timothy F., and Tanya J. Hall. "The triple bottom line: What is it and how does it work." \textit{Indiana Business Review} 86, no. 1 (2011): 4-8.} Essentially, the idea behind the shift is that environmental and social costs of business operations are assigned a monetary value through internal or external mechanisms and calculated into the costs of doing business, so that a business is only truly profitable \textit{after} it pays the full price of bringing a product to market. While these new approaches are commendable for attempting to calculate ecological costs, there are great difficulties in assigning a financial value to issues like the endangerment and extinction of various animal and plant species or the increased alienation of humans from healthy and vibrant ecosystems.

While it may seem contradictory, neoclassical economics, combined with a non-anthropocentric worldview, may give consumers a language to advance ecological preservation
with others as an act of ‘self-interest’. If a consumer wanted to be spared costs related to health and safety which stem from commercial activities, the most self-interested actions they could take would be to advocate for policies which incorporate the costs of these ‘externalities’ into the laws and tax structures which govern the business environment and to patronize businesses which are already behaving in environmental friendly ways. Furthermore, if ‘utility’ is derived from subjective valuation (for example, how a diamond ring carries a higher price than months of groceries), then individuals and governments could build higher valuations of non-human species or ecosystems into their actions and policies. A free market advocate would denigrate such regulations on economic grounds, but a proponent of sound environmental policy and regulation could do the same by justifying the regulations on the basis of individual and collective valuations which exist alongside, or subsume, the desire for cheap consumer goods. Indeed, it should be recognized that proponents of the civic and environmental perspective are not going to breach the static educational policy spheres without having a command of the dominant, market-oriented ‘common sense’ concepts and language being used by the public and politicians.

An interesting development of the last decade is the rising interest in minimalist and ‘off-grid’ lifestyles, which make both economic and ecological sense. Recall, neoclassical

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311 This is already done, to a degree, in the way in which federal and state level EPA will prevent or halt construction projects which would threaten endangered species.

312 Using the term ‘common sense’ in the Gramscian sense. Gramsci, Antonio, and Quitin Hoare. *Selections from the prison notebooks*. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971); see also Kovacs, Philip Edward, "Are Public Schools Worth Saving? If So, By Whom?." Dissertation, (Georgia State University, 2006), which notes that pressure to publish in academe has led to increasing levels of specialization and insular jargon, un-relatable to a broader audience. He instead convincingly advocates for the need to orient scholarship for public dissemination in order for it to make a meaningful difference in policy spheres and education practice.
economists push for economic efficiency as delivering the best social outcomes, not necessarily economic growth.\textsuperscript{313} In the neoclassical paradigm, consumers should buy only the goods and services which provide utility to them in balance with their available resources and other wants and needs. The minimalist movement advocates for individuals to significantly reduce or remove as many costs as possible from a person’s life to focus only on what is essential. Some common themes of the movement are scaling back on the number of possessions, such as clothing or household items, to as few as possible and to reduce re-occurring costs and fees associated with technological services, automobiles, and housing by finding cheaper alternatives, or doing without them altogether.\textsuperscript{314} By significantly reducing one’s living expenses and possessions, the idea is that individual becomes less dependent of wage labor and increases their free time to pursue other interests and leisure.\textsuperscript{315} This notion of minimalism as a tool to achieve other ends, such as independence or happiness, means that it is practiced differently by each individual. As one minimalist author writes,

Minimalism is not nor should it ever become a goal in itself, but merely a tool in pursuit of a goal. (...) If we want to lead a simple, wise and harmonious life, we must understand

\textsuperscript{313} Though I must concede that growth and development is the objective of nearly all macroeconomic policy on the grounds of creating economic opportunities to lift individuals, communities, and nations out of poverty by pulling them into the capitalist economic system. The problem is that efficiency is often equated with growth, in the assumption that if energy, labor, technology, and public and private infrastructure develop efficiencies in their production and delivery of goods and services it yields economic growth. Studies such as Ayres, Robert U., Hal Turton, and Tom Casten. "Energy efficiency, sustainability and economic growth." Energy 32, no. 5 (2007): 634-648, are attempting to disaggregate these concepts by applying a material and scientific understanding of energy to economic policy and suggesting mechanisms for distributed energy networks and new renewable technologies which deliver ‘growth’ in the form of managing resources properly and using labor to construct and maintain such systems.


\textsuperscript{315} Not unlike Thoreau’s experiment at Walden Pond.
which values are important to us because they lead us through life and everything else comes out of them.\textsuperscript{316} If everyone behaved in this manner, it would be economically efficient and environmentally friendly (in reducing waste and energy footprints). Of course, this model would retract the existing economic structure which is built on mass consumerism and energy expenditure, but there are reasons to believe it can yield ‘growth’ in new, sustainable forms.\textsuperscript{317} By using an ecological perspective to broaden the terms of ‘utility’ and ‘value’ beyond market interests to include non-human considerations, self-interest does not need to be decoupled from the wellbeing of the natural world.

If the environmental frame taught us anything, it is that this consideration of economic and environmental concerns through the lens of human-centered costs and utility, misses the point regarding the intrinsic value of non-human life and the devastation anthropocentric thinking has already had on Earth’s ecosystems. This is where Jonas’ perspective becomes so valuable. He acknowledges that ethics is a realm of human concern, because only humans can consciously choose the ways in which they interact with other species, but that human concerns cannot be divorced from these other species – the realm of ethical consideration must include the totality of the biosphere. Hence, his imperative to act so as to preserve the continuation of humanity necessarily must acknowledge ecological contingency and incorporate non-human beings and resources into ethical decision making. Integrated with Dewey’s idea of the publics, who form out of concern for the consequences the actions of others might have, we see the

\textsuperscript{316} Dopierała, Minimalism—a new mode of consumption, 69.

\textsuperscript{317} See above footnote on efficiency, growth, and Ayers et al. (2007).
formation of publics from a variety of perspectives around the concern for these ecological consequences (for example The World Wildlife Foundation, The Sierra Club, Greenpeace, etc.).

The challenge is how individuals and publics come to an awareness of forces shaping the world around them, and having identified these forces, represent their interests, and the interests of the environment, to state representatives and institutions effectively. As if that were not difficult enough, an ongoing problem in capitalist societies for over a century has been the way in which public interests become superseded, displaced, or silenced by business interests seeking to minimize regulation and maximize short term profitability. Immersed in this frustrating milieu, educational institutions are deeply influenced and constrained by logics of economic competition and individual ambition. Even institutions that seek a more civically and environmentally oriented curriculum and pedagogy may find themselves stymied by the remarkably static bureaucracy and structure of the school. Many of the suggestions arising from the environmental education movement conflict with the explicit and implicit purposes of modern schooling.

A function of knowledge in environmental education is immediate use for the social value of a sustainable and emancipated quality of life, which conflicts with the major function of school knowledge as storage for future use and the enhancement of individual status and economic well-being. While environmental education advocates learning that is holistic and co-operative, school learning tends to be atomistic and individual.

Echoing the critiques by progressive educators of schooling for the past century, and critical theorists of the past fifty years, Stevenson articulates an incompatibility of successful educational

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endeavors with the often conservative, individualistic, and routinized structures of modern schooling. These concerns do not preclude the normative stance that environmental education should be pursued in schools as a minimum step, but suggest that greater success would be achieved in a more progressive institutional environment and that educators might consider the incorporation of non-school based pedagogy into their approach. If we are to pursue the more integrated paradigm for understanding the importance of consumption and consumer education I have proposed in this dissertation, it will require a requisite paradigm shift for how educational institutions operate in practice and the kind of curricula they offer to individuals.

**The Role of Educational Institutions as Public Institutions**

Returning to Dewey’s proposals for how the state might provide educational institutions and resources, publicly funded research apparatuses, and quasi-public media outlets outlined in Chapter 3, we can consider interventions that might prevent the rising of problematic publics formed through misinformation, like the one which responded to Jade Helm, and perhaps even facilitate the democratic relations that could prevent misguided governmental responses. The decline of local news in the advent of the digital era has been widely covered, but there has been limited study and appreciation of its consequences. In the information vacuum created, literally *anyone* providing information on a local subject of importance can seem authoritative. In the current political climate where public funding at all levels of government is under threat, it seems unlikely that a robust program of research, dissemination, and news from state sponsored institutions will develop. As a result, I propose two mechanisms by which existing educational institutions might improve the state of public information by better integrating themselves into public problems while simultaneously educating students and citizens to better evaluate sources and find actionable information to improve their lives.
In recent decades there has been a growing challenge to the traditional view of universities as producers of knowledge, which is consumed by the public. In this traditional paradigm, university officials, such as academic leaders and fundraisers, have viewed their role as unilateral communicators of the university’s activities and mission to those outside the campus walls, selling the interests and prestige of the university to external constituencies. Weerts contrasts this traditional paradigm with an “engaged” approach grounded in a constructivist view of universities, which asserts that knowledge lies both inside and outside of traditional boundaries and that the creation of knowledge is a collective process. In this engaged approach, university officials involve community partners in the inner workings of the institution and simultaneously use university resources to tackle problems relevant to the community. He writes,

In the model, external stakeholders are not merely consumers and supporters of knowledge producers, but partners in the creation, dissemination, and implementation of knowledge. Simply put, the engagement model expands traditional university teaching, learning, and scholarly inquiry to include external stakeholders in a community of learners. The ultimate goal of this model is not knowledge distribution, but systemic change in communities and society at large.

The engagement model is not simply theoretical, as many universities across the globe have reoriented the focus of their activities, research, teaching, and service included, to pursue

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321 Weerts, Toward an engagement model.

322 Weerts, 87.
community development and mutual positive change. While there are concerns that university community engagement projects remain embedded in a hierarchical arrangement where benefits are gained uni-directionally in the university’s favor, there are promising cases of universities becoming “anchor institutions” helping to facilitate and promote community directed, sustainable revitalization and growth along a variety of health, economic, and wellbeing dimensions.

An example of engaged scholarship that integrated university and community resources to tackle pressing issues in a marginalized community can be found in the case of Elon University. Elon, a mid-sized, private liberal arts school, is located in North Carolina, created an initiative for faculty from disciplines such as education, communication, and anthropology to assist a local high school that had recently been threatened with closure because of its high dropout rates and failure to educate students along a number of dimensions. The Elon faculty involved in the project advocated for a participatory-action approach where local school leaders,

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teachers, and the students themselves would be engaged to determine the biggest needs for the school and facilitate interventions. The project was intentionally youth-directed, with both high school and college students leading the project to develop resources, workshops, and tutoring to not only improve graduation rates, but put the high school students on a path to college with test preparation, counseling, and admissions assistance. The authors of a case-study on the project wrote, following the success of the program,

Elon University, like many other colleges and universities, can make dramatic inroads in addressing inequities by embracing its neighbors and co-creating opportunities for young people. Partnerships can include sharing physical facilities (housing, classrooms, computer labs, etc.), expertise (in engaged learning, leadership, service learning, research, community-based skills and insights) and human resources (faculty, staff, student mentors/teaching assistants/tutors, community leaders). Tackling entrenched and complex issues like the unlevel playing field of higher education will take all parts of a community (especially higher education institutions).327

The faculty acted as facilitators and “boundary spanners” rather than directors of what became known as the “Elon Academy,” and played a pivotal role in communicating the work to the larger community and soliciting support from a broader base of constituents.

The particular relevance of the engaged university model, and examples such as Elon Academy, to Dewey’s public institutional framework is the role and function of ‘experts’ in taking on issues of public relevance and sending back information into the public sphere as a shared project of progressive improvement. If faculty are seen to be locked away in an ivory tower researching questions disassociated or unrecognizable to an average citizen, and engage with the public only as test subjects and populations to be studied and abstracted, the public has little reason to appreciate or trust the work that is being done by them. In contrast, a research project that is born from a public expressing an area of social concern, and that engages the

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public as respected partners in studying and addressing the problem, closes the divide between educational institutions and the community and might partially fill the information vacuum left from the decline of local news media. Mason, commenting on Dewey’s suggested value of experts, writes

It was not because they possessed superior intelligence, but because they had acquired specialized habits through exclusive training. These habits included carefully examining issues, openly sharing and building knowledge through exchanges with peers, testing conclusions and modifying their understandings based on results. These intelligent habits of inquiry and communication represented a refined version of what Dewey argued should be imparted to all citizens as constitutive habits of a re-emergent public sphere.

In this description, as in a participatory action research project, faculty experts help to give citizens the tools of inquiry and improve the channels of communication. As a result, the health of the initial public can be improved, through increased self-awareness and growth in size as the scope mutual interest expands, and their ability to act is increased, through developed competencies and access to networks of intellectual and institutional capital. The positive ‘products’ of this type of inquiry are realized through the engagement of the research itself with citizens as well as in data, reports, presentations, and other types of communication into the world that can be accessed, examined, and studied by other citizens and publics.

**Reframing Consumer Education in Engaged Public Institutions**

It is not enough that the engaged university rethink who the ‘consumers’ of its research, teaching, and service are; but that it also reconsiders its own role as a consuming organization. One of the main thrusts of the anchor institution vision referenced in the literature above is that universities and other non-profit institutions have tremendous purchasing power for both

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material goods like utilities, lab equipment, paper products, food, and office supplies as well as through services such as technology support, facility maintenance, landscaping, and catering. As publicly orientated institutions, universities and other non-profit organizations must consider how their consumption of goods and services impacts the communities they claim to value and explore how this tremendous purchasing power can be leveraged to improve the community. Consider, for example, a study in Northeast Ohio which has shown that if anchor institutions such as universities, school systems, and hospitals shifted their food purchasing so that 25% was sourced from local farmers and food suppliers, over 2,500 gross new jobs would be created and regional output increased by nearly $400 million. The University of Pennsylvania has already put a local sourcing program in place by spending a minimum of 10% of its annual purchasing on local vendors in West Philadelphia, contributing $94.8 million to the local economy. The ongoing fossil fuel divestment movement is another example of universities (often pressured by student, faculty, and alumni publics) making a moral decision not to profit from a harmful industry. Through these examples, we can see how a university can both serve the public interest in a Deweyian sense through research, partnerships, and dissemination while also representing a ‘public’ themselves, making economic decisions that take calculations regarding social and environmental consequences into account.

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The second major way that educational institutions can address modern problems related to communication and dissemination of fundamentally important issues is by educating the public to maintain a scientific disposition and mode of inquiry. In the above discussions of *The Public and its Problems*, recall that Dewey wrote it was not necessary for the general public to have the knowledge and training of a scientist or other expert, but rather the ability to interpret and judge what was produced by the sciences so as to apply it to their everyday challenges. Dewey advocated that young people be taught the skills of inquiry and experimentation, and specifically suggested that they learn to apply his interpretation of the scientific method: sensing perplexing situations, clarifying the problem, formulating a tentative hypothesis, testing the hypothesis, revising with rigorous tests, and acting on the solution.\(^{331}\) His later work would add to these steps of inquiry other important dimensions like that students direct their inquiry toward problems of personal interest to them, and that opportunity for reflective thinking be integrated throughout the inquiry process.\(^{332}\)

The meaning of Dewey’s prescriptions for experimental thinking and scientific inquiry can only be understood in the context of practice – that is, they can have no value or meaning for students if they are not thoroughly prompted to use these types of thinking in educational settings and given the opportunity to learn what inquiry means for themselves. Chambliss, in interpreting Dewey’s philosophy as a “theory of conduct”, emphasizes both the ethical and empirical characteristics of his educational prescriptions.

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Dewey’s characterization of ideas as ‘anticipation of some continuity of an activity and a consequence which has not yet shown itself,’ points to the possibility of determining some good which... is a quality of life in conduct. And in saying that ideas are ‘tested by the operation of acting upon them,’ Dewey reiterates, in his own way, what Aristotle was seeking when he said that when we carry our inquiry into conduct, it is to ‘ask how we are to act rightly.’

Such an approach implies humility, in that we will not always know what it means to act rightly, or that even if we do have an initial guess based on prior experience and knowledge, that we are obligated to test our understanding honestly and see if the consequences of an action correspond with our anticipations. Further, this explicit connection between knowledge and ethics promotes a challenge to the problem of confirmation bias which enables modern ‘information bubbles’ and ‘echo chambers.’ It is not enough that that individuals and groups formulate expectations, test hypotheses, and reflect on results in matters of science, but also in general application through the practice of living. In consuming information from the world, formulating opinions about matters of importance, and deciding on courses of action to take in every-day matters, students must be taught that individual choices have significance and deserve careful consideration in regards to their consequences in the larger social and ecological context.

**Ethical and Educational Heuristics for Consumer Education**

The discussion to this point has focused on the questions of why students should be educated in matters related to their existence as consumers. Arriving at the conclusion that yes, indeed, consumer education is necessary along a variety of dimensions, begs the question of *what will that education look like* specifically. It is beyond the scope of this study to articulate a thorough vision for the content and methodology of a consumer education curricula, though the

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above discussions have certainly provided clues for educational practitioners seeking to
revitalize the subject in their own spheres of influence. Instead, given that there are so many
broad areas for fruitful investigation using the ‘engaged’ model described above, which will
evolve rapidly as our social, economic, and environmental contexts change, I would like to
recommend a few educational and ethical heuristics that can prompt the kind of investigative and
reflective dispositions needed in the modern consumer citizen.

The first heuristic I suggest draws from the burgeoning framework of Critical Media
Literacy which concerns itself with educating amid the rapidly changing communication and
information ecosystem engendered by new technologies and digital platforms. Specifically, the
work of Funk, Kellner, and Share provides extremely practical insight into how media are being
consumed and integrated into people’s every experience through videos, tweets, memes, instant
messages, and a host of other digital media.\textsuperscript{334} They write that these media are “challenging old
ideas of audience, media, and relationships between senders and receivers.”\textsuperscript{335} In these new
media, the notions of who producers and consumers of media is blurred, and lines between
user-generated and company-generated content are made purposefully ambiguous as a
mechanism for subtle marketing opportunities. Further complicating such ambiguities are the
ways in which use and consumption in these digital channels drastically impact identity
formation and in particular expose children to “global flows of consumption, identity, and
information in ways unheard of in earlier generations.”\textsuperscript{336} Educators seeking to ensure students

\textsuperscript{334} Funk, Steven; Kellner, Douglas; and Share, Jeff. “Critical Media Literacy as
Transformative Pedagogy.” In Yildiz, Melda and Keengew, Jared, eds. Handbook of Research
on Media Literacy in the Digital Age. (Information Science Reference, IGI Global, 2016).

\textsuperscript{335} Funk, Kellner, and Share, 6.

\textsuperscript{336} Funk, Kellner, and Share, 6 quoting Carrington, Victoria Maree. "New textual
have a 21st century literacy must expand their conception of reading and writing into these new modalities, and equip students with a framework that helps them critically analyze and interpret the troves of messages they are exposed to.

The framework developed by Funk, Kellner, and Share promotes six questions to guide media education specifically, but are clearly applicable to a broader consumer education framework where the gathering and interpreting of information to make civic, economic, and environmental judgements and decisions is vital. The guiding questions are

1. Who are all the possible people who made choices that helped create this text?
2. How was this text constructed and delivered/accessed?
3. How could this text be understood differently?
4. What values, points of view, and ideologies are represented or missing from this text or influenced by the medium?
5. Why was this text created and/or shared?
6. Whom does this text advantage and/or disadvantage?\(^{337}\)

Each question is specifically designed to evoke notions social construction, positionality, politics, and representation in a classroom setting and evoke an investigative and reflective stance from students. If we take the term ‘text’ to imply any form of information or image that carries a meaning or message, the guiding questions are extremely helpful in the analysis of broad forms of communication. Further, acknowledging that products, and the associated information and marketing provided by a company about them, constitute forms of texts; the questions, or ones like them, can be used to as a consumer heuristic. An adapted version of these questions for thinking about where and how a product came to be, and the associated consequences of its existence, might read something like:

1. What are all the resources that were used to create this product and who were all the people involved in procuring and modifying those resources?
2. How was this product created, marketed, delivered, and accessed?

\(^{337}\) Funk, Kellner, and Share, 7-8.
3. How could this product have been created, marketed, delivered, and accessed differently?
4. What values, points of view, and ideologies are represented or missing in the creation and marketing of this product?
5. How is this product being used and how is it being disposed of or recycled at the end of its lifecycle?
6. What people and ecological systems are being advantaged or disadvantaged by this product?

Such ‘critical consumer literacy’ questions pose significant and intriguing prompts for analysis and exploration which could use knowledge and application from diverse academic disciplines like social studies, that natural sciences, language arts, and mathematics to answer them.

In helping students move from understanding to application, my second proposed heuristic is drawn from the area of applied ethics and provides some suggestions for decision making in a complicated consumer landscape. Generally, in applied ethics a primary goal is the reduction or minimization of harm and suffering. As alluded to in Chapter 5, the realm of ethics historically only paid heed to immediate human suffering and it did not capture the interest of future generation nor the interests of non-human animals or ecosystems. In recent decades, scholars like Peter Singer have helped to popularize ethical considerations of non-human beings as well as the importance of aiming for effectiveness in weighing possible actions. Following in this vein, there is a nascent literature on consumer responsibilities and ethics which aims to articulate the challenges and tools which can be used to help consumers act ethically in the

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338 Singer, Peter. *Practical ethics*. (Cambridge University Press, 2011). Charges have been levied against Singer and others who support the “Effective Altruism” movement of being overly utilitarian and individualistic in orientation and discounting systematic institution reform, summarized well in McMahan, Jeff. "Philosophical critiques of effective altruism." *The Philosophers' Magazine* 73 (2016): 92-99. I do not come down heavily on one side or the other of these perspectives, but in the spirit of pragmatism am extremely interested in the practical outcomes of these changing frameworks.
marketplace. Importantly, Peacock notes, the inability to research every particular product does not reduce the consumer’s moral culpability. He writes,

> The impossibility of informing herself fully about every commodity does not mean that it is impossible (or even terribly difficult) for her to inform herself to some degree about some commodities. The question then becomes “About which, among the sea of commodities available, should a consumer inform herself so as to avoid the state of being culpably ignorant?”

Peacock’s formulation, which is focused on the individual consumer, also begs the question as to what extent a company has a moral responsibility to make their business processes relatively transparent and information on their products relatively easy to find and access. And further, in addition to these individual obligations to educate oneself, what obligations are there of public institutions, like public schools and universities, to help individual inform themselves.

Peacock, acknowledging the dearth of quality consumer data, advises that consumers prioritize research on goods or services along the following parameters.

1) Inform yourself first about products which are most likely to give rise to a moral wrong. This precept implies that consumers ought to develop a general awareness of common moral wrongs associated with modern goods and services. Even if the consumer lacks specific information about say the labor practices of a particular garment producer or the living conditions of chickens on a poultry farm; knowledge of the well-documented moral hazards of these industries should lead the consumer to be cautious and seek further information on a given product before proceeding. 2) Focus attention on purchases which cause higher degrees of negative consequences. This precept emphasizes the scale of impact. For instance, given consumer’s limited time and energy

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340 Peacock, 8-10.
constraints, decisions about what type of home or vehicle to purchase, given the level of resources and labor needed to create and maintain them, should be given greater weight and attention than what type of pencil to buy. Scale could also be measured by frequency, where the consumer ought to spend more time researching products or services which they regularly purchase or consume than those which they do not.

While the first and second of Peacock’s precepts focus on which consumer decisions one should focus one’s time and attention on, his third and fourth emphasize the extent to which one should spend expend effort. They are to 3) pursue information that is relatively easy to research and 4) gather information only to the point that it does not place an undue burden upon you. For these precepts, Peacock applies Singer’s criterion, “If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.” In the context of a consumer education curriculum, educators can helps students apply these precepts by equipping them with the skills to need to quickly and easily research information on the companies, manufacturing processes, and supply chains that produce products and services, as well as the positive and negative utility of the good or service itself. Educational institutions themselves can contribute to the data and efficacy of consumer facing research portals, with the goal of making ease of research into areas of social and environmental responsibility as simple as it currently is to access a product’s customer satisfaction reviews.

Importantly, I would add to these suggestions, which are individualistic in nature, a collective imperative that consumers undertake their obligatory research efforts in conjunction

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with others so that they can act on the consumer information that will make the most meaningful difference. Such precepts, akin to the critical consumer literacy prompting questions above which ask the individual to consider other points of view and larger impact, could read: 6) investigate how others are understanding the potential moral hazards of a given industry, product, or service 7) upon finding unresolved or unaddressed ethical concerns, take steps to reduce harm through your individual choices as well as through coordinated methods such as political advocacy, collective protest, or boycott.

Applying these guiding heuristics with modern tools of communication and investigation, there is tremendous potential for consumers to ‘crowd source’ useful information and generate aggregate impact. Of course, digital platforms and communication run risks of supplying misinformation (as in the Jade Helm example of Chapter 3), and in overwhelming the individual in the sheer abundance of information and sources available. But if we can create networks of scientific research and dissemination through healthy and engaged institutions, and supply individuals with capacities for interpretation and application, the information ecosystem within which we make consumer decisions can be dramatically improved. As Dewey noted,

Meanings run in the channels formed by instrumentalities of which, in the end, language, the vehicles of thought as well as of communication, is the most important…A more intelligent state of social affairs, one more informed with knowledge, more directed by intelligence, would not improve original endowments one whit, but would raise the level upon which the intelligence of all operates.\textsuperscript{342}

In other words, Dewey is emphasizing our ability to collectively discern and operate within a technologically rich and complicated context is more important than the intelligence of any one person. Underscoring this point, he concludes, “The notion that intelligence is a personal

endowment or personal attainment is the great conceit of the intellectual class”. The consumer education suggestions and heuristics proposed above, while dependent on an appeal to an individual’s ethical valuations which will always have a personal dimension, cannot be successful if they view knowledge as something to be possessed by the individual. The civic, economic, and environmental challenges outlined in this study are public problems which can only be addressed with a collective, public effort.

Conclusion

This study explored normative frameworks for improving consumer education in the United States. In contrasting views from disparate civic, economic, and environmental frameworks about what it means to be a consumer, I aimed to develop a broader philosophical understanding of consumption and assess the implications drawn from this understanding for educational practice. All of the normative frameworks discussed asserted that individual and collective benefits would arise when individuals were equipped with knowledge and skills to make informed evaluations of what and what not to consume, supporting my thesis that consumer education should be an essential component of public education.

In this concluding chapter, I wrestled with tensions that arise among the three frameworks, for while all agree consumer education is important, each offers sometimes conflicting prescriptions for how to focus individual or public action. I suggested that all individual decisions, whether they be economic or ethical, will have a socially-constituted element. As such, I recommended an engaged approach from educational institutions that fully embraces a role as co-creators of public knowledge as well as from educators themselves to press students to understand the social and environmental relationships of knowledge and action. I

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also argued against anthropocentric perspectives of value and utility, and that ecological considerations can factor heavily into ‘self-interested’ market decisions. With this perspective in mind, I recommended curricula and heuristics that help students to investigate and understand how ecological processes are embedded in their daily lives and what ecological and social consequences may arise from productive and consumptive economic decisions.

For school-minded educators seeking to apply this broadly envisioned consumer education in the curriculum, a century’s old question arises as to whether consumer education should exist as a stand-alone course of study or discipline, or should it be incorporated into prevalent and existing subject areas. To this I would respond, “both and more.” When we think about the most pressing questions of public concern like “Can democracy function if the public is consuming incomplete, biased, or false information and if they cannot represent their interests to the State?”, “Can our economy function if consumers cannot find quality information on goods and services, and use their resources for rational and self-beneficial purposes?”, or “Can our society continue if our ecosystems are polluted or damaged beyond the point of habitability?”; it is evident that there is a moral imperative to enhance the quality and availability of consumer education. If we do not, we will continue to proceed down a path of ignorant consumerism at our peril, and the peril of future generations.
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