

A HISTORY OF CHILDHOOD COMMODIFICATION IN ITALY: HISTORICAL-EDUCATIONAL NOTES

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The commodification of childhood is a main theme in the history of consumption. Children are active consumers in the everyday market. In Italy studies on the commodification of childhood are of sociological and psychological character, so there are few studies on the historical and educational aspect. Thus my contribution offers reflections on this field of study, so as to highlight the influence of consumption on educational methods and thus on children's lives.

La Mercificazione dell'infanzia è un importante filone di ricerca all'interno della storia dei consumi. I bambini sono infatti consumatori attivi nel mercato, ma in Italia gli studi sul tema presentano per lo più carattere sociologico e psicologico riducendosi a ben poche le riflessioni di taglio storico-educativo. Il presente lavoro tenta di offrire un contributo in tale direzione al fine di sottolineare l'influenza che i consumi esercitano nelle pratiche educative dunque nella vita di bambini e bambine.

Key words: *Education, childhood, consumption, consumption practices, responsibility.*

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1. The relationship between educational history and consumption in Italy

Childhood commodification is an unexplored theme in Italy. When talking about the history of consumption and its relevance to everyday behavior, one immediately refers to studies of Paolo Capuzzo, Stefano Cavazza, Emanuela Scarpellini.¹ On the

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¹ A. Santoni Rugiu (2003), *La pedagogia del consumismo (e del letame)*, Anicia, Roma; S. Oliviero (2014), *La pedagogia del consumo e del supermarket: modelli educativi emergenti nell'Italia del miracolo economico*, pp.511-519, in Corsi M. (a cura di), *La Ricerca Pedagogica in Italia. Tra innovazione e internalizzazione*, Pensa Multimedia, Lecce; Id. (2016), *Lavoro consumo e formazione. Una prospettiva storico-educativa*, in «Rivista di storia dell'educazione», Vol. I, pp.125-140;

P. Capuzzo (1999), *Storia dei consumi. Nuove prospettive storiografiche* in «Contemporanea rivista di storia dell'800 e del '900», pp.771-790; Id. (2006), *Culture del consumo*, Il Mulino, Bologna; Id. (2015), *Il consumatore italiano*, in: *L'Italia del cibo*, Utet, Milano, pp. 241-255.

S. Cavazza (2004) *Dimensione di massa. Individui, folle, consumi 1830 -1945*, Il Mulino, Bologna; Id - E. Scarpellini (2006), *Il secolo dei consumi. Dinamiche sociali nell'Europa del Novecento*, Carocci, Roma; S. Cavazza - E. Scarpellini, *Dal consumo desiderato al consumo realizzato. L'avvento della società dei consumi nell'Italia postbellica*, in Id - Scarpellini E. (2010), *La rivoluzione dei consumi*, Il Mulino, Bologna, pp. 53-96.

E. Scarpellini (2007), *La spesa è uguale per tutti. L'avventura dei supermercati in Italia*, Marsilio, Venezia; Ead. (2008), *L'Italia dei consumi. Dalla belle époque al nuovo millennio*, Laterza, Roma; Ead. (2011), *Comprare all'americana, le origini della rivoluzione commerciale in Italia, 1945-1971*, Il Mulino, Bologna; Ead. (2013), *I consumi della vita quotidiana*, Il Mulino, Bologna; Ead. (2014), *A*

other hand, there is no evidence of studies or historical – educational research on the influence of consumption on childhood. More important are only the studies of Antonio Santoni Rugiu and Stefano Oliviero. To talk about childhood in Italy means looking at a large number of studies that aim to place the child, his/her universe, the important adult, in the centre. The history of education gives an in-depth analysis of the conditions of raising children, not only during the first years of the 20th century, but prior to this, on the difficulties of growing up during the Liberal Age, or under the yoke of child labour and the social burden of poor education. The main contributors to these interesting and abundant studies are, among others, Bertoni Jovine, Leonardo Trisciuzzi, Egle Becchi, Franco Cambi Simonetta Ulivieri.² Their main interest is to touch on child history in different periods of History. The subject of consumption however, has not yet been studied in depth, despite its relevance in the cultural changes in Italy in the last half of the century. And it is not by chance that it is precisely the influence of consumption in the post-war society that is responsible for the modern figure of the child, in the past as a new TV viewer and now as a “consumer”.

2. TV, Carosello and the symbolic value of goods

There is a precise reason for looking back at the first decades of the Republic of Italy. It helps comprehend the growth of consumption and thus the commodification of childhood, from its onset to its placing into the consumerist machine. Children today are a well – defined target as consumers, active agents in the market, considerably influential not only among peers, but also in the choice of family purchases. This is why we should start from a general question and attempt to answer it as clearly as possible. What exactly does commodification of childhood mean and when did it appear in Italy? Although during the first post-war the social-economic years, showed the social-economic situation in Italy was critical and extreme poverty was widespread, Italy was very soon transformed into a leading industrial nation, in a unique way with respect to the other European countries. The arrive of the allies had not only left its mark in its fight and defence against the common enemy – Nazy – Germany – but also, in terms of new clichés, habits and language, that were rapidly welcomed into our culture. The American way of life was often in disagreement with Italian values of moral defence. The importance given to educating the new generation, protecting theme from vices and excesses of consumerist society. 1954 was the year in wich Rai Rai - *Radio televisione italiana* began broadcasting, and then the TV, (later to cause great conflict between the *Apocalyptic* and *Integrated*)³, became a daily companion that filled the domestic silence and influence the course of consumption for mothers and children. On the 3rd

tavola! Gli italiani in 7 pranzi, Laterza, Roma-Bari; Ead. (2017), *La stoffa dell'Italia. Storia e cultura della moda dal 1945 a oggi*, Laterza Bari- Roma.

² D. Bertoni Jovine (1963), *L'alienazione dell'infanzia. Il lavoro minorile nella società moderna*, Manzuoli, Firenze; L. Trisciuzzi (1977), *La scoperta dell'infanzia*, Le Monnier, Firenze; E. Becchi (1987), *Storia dell'educazione*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze; Ead. et All. (1990), *Autobiografia d'infanzia fra letteratura e film*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1990; E. Becchi (1994), *I bambini nella storia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari; Ead - A. Semeraro (2001), *Archivi d'infanzia. Per una storiografia della prima età*, La Nuova Italia, Scandicci-Firenze; F. Cambi, S. Ulivieri (1988), *La storia dell'infanzia nell'Italia liberale*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze; S. Ulivieri (1999) (edited by), *Le bambine nella storia dell'educazione*, Laterza, Roma-Bari.

³ Critics and supporters.

February 1957 a programme called *Carosello* was born. Every evening at about 8.50, for about ten minutes, the young viewers, along with their parents, were entertained by imaginary characters, especially designed by professionals in the sector, to draw children's attention, fuel their mothers' desires and encourage the purchase of their sponsored goods.⁴ *Carosello* was composed of a number of sketches promoting different products: for daily hygiene, healthy cooking, and clothing for the young and old. Everything was carefully calculated to attract viewers/consumers. The small, harmless characters Calimero, Priscilla and Olivella, were a reference point to children represented by half cartoon, half human characters such as Topogigio, a small anthropomorphic mouse.⁵ These characters expressed needs and desires that soon became those of children the homologation began and specific individual needs became induced needs.⁶ Society lost its social differentiation and brands full of symbolic value appeared and were able to bring middle-class children to poor ones. The brands brought down traditional social barriers, yet built new ones: not being able to afford certain clothes, food and toys, became the modern divider between the rich and the poor. Was this period in which childhood commodification began? TV and *Carosello* to indeed appear to be responsible for this. Before them, images loaded with hidden meanings were probably in-existent and individual needs were closely linked to real needs. Nevertheless, in a recent analysis by Graziano Mamone, we can see that at the beginning of the 20th Century our country's culture had already been hit by persuasive messages especially directed to children. In his article entitled *La Mercificazione dell'infanzia nella Guerra di Libia 1911-1912*, Mamone writes of a simple and direct warlike language, easily understood by children of that time.⁷ If war were a child's game, the children could be its players.⁸

Toys were adapted to the war and a carnivalis-que costume market drew the new generations towards the national cause.⁹ Even the pictures on postcards were aimed at educating people on war, along with the well-known *Nello il marinetto*, Gian Saetta *il bersagliere*, some of the main characters of *Corriere dei piccoli*, a children's magazine.¹⁰ So could it be that commodification began with the war against Libya? We can try to answer this question by analyzing the etymology of the term. Commodification is the transformation of goods and things that would not naturally be commercial objects - human qualities, social relationships, cultural traditions, idealistic or aesthetic values.¹¹

The Childhood commodification process makes the values upon which children form themselves an object of commerce, obliging them to commodify their world. The Libyan War therefore, despite teaching children to engage in conflict, happy to play at war, certainly encouraged them to wish and to buy less. The commodification of free time probably occurred *before that of childhood*. Anyway this manipulation was limited

⁴ As an example: *3 febbraio 1957 nasce Carosello* in <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMJGoJM1hHo> accessed on 2.01.2018.>

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ H. Hengst (2001), *Bambini, consumo e gap generazionale* in E. Becchi - A. Semeraro, *Archivi d'Infanzia. Per una storiografia della prima età*, La Nuova Italia, Milano, p. 109.

⁷ G. Mamone (2017), *La Mercificazione dell'infanzia nella Guerra di Libia 1911-1912*, in «Rivista di storia dell'educazione», n. 4, pp. 119-141.

⁸ *Ivi*, p.122.

⁹ *Ivi*, p.131.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, pp.136-137.

¹¹ *Treccani Dizionario Online* in «www.treccani.it» accessed on 06.01.18.

to the war period and then ended with the war. After the Second World War however, a different message was conveyed. Children no longer found joy in imagining themselves to be soldiers. Postcards and comics were in line with TV and were able to spread the message in a faster and somewhat convincing way. TV reaches everyone: rich and poor children, big cities and small villages and facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and information. The dominant culture passes through the TV and because the new born Republic is based on consumption, TV is the best means for sponsoring and consolidating it.¹² The life and choices of a child are only apparently free. In fact, they must always be dictated by whatever the consumption world considers normal. To move away from these principles means to face social labelling, judgment and mockery.¹³ The process of need induction, though considerably harmful for adult consumers, who are transformed into tenacious consumers, is just as dangerous for children, often unable to understand the hidden meanings of modern culture. It is from these meanings that they learn to base their own choices, form relationships, live in society and find their inner balance.

3. Consumption and Commodification: outside Italy

In Italy seems that little space has been given to the education and training of the child consumers, where elsewhere there has been considerable interest in the matter. Contributions are mostly of a sociological and psychological nature, and prove to have grasped the influence of consumption on children's minds before others. Examples of this are the work of Vince Packard, *The hidden Persuaders* (1958); *Our endangered children* (1983); Neil Postman, *The end of Education* (1997); Karl Popper *Cattiva maestra televisione*, (1994), Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy* (2005). In 1974 Scott Ward pointed out how children learn to consume mainly through imitative learning, parent-child interaction and opportunities for independent consumption. In 1987 George Moschis then defined consumer socialization as a long-lasting process that starts during childhood and continues through to old age. In 2004 another sociologist Daniel Thomas Cook entitles his book *The Commodification of Childhood*, which discusses the manipulation process of children in the consumption field. In his concise yet accurate book, Cook outlines a historical process originating in the 1929 American black crisis. The crash of the stock market caused a lot of damage. To avoid the error of over production again, industry forged a new class of consumption: children. Although the effects of the manipulation process only began in Italy after the Second World War, Cook states that it began in the first decades of the 20th Century. He traces the origin of the success of merchandise to be in their interpretation within American society. These goods seemed to be beneficial to children, to be bought solely in the child's interest. At the time, society did not understand how these goods could be so strongly desired by children as to deeply convince their parents and families to buy them.¹⁴ As a consequence, mothers, the most responsible for the well-being of their children, permanently and inadvertently brought them into the world of consumption. Mothers

¹² Z. Bauman (1999), *Dentro la globalizzazione. Le conseguenze sulle persone*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, p. 98.

¹³ D.T. Cook (2004), *The Commodification of childhood. The children's clothing industry and the rise of the child consumer*, Durham, University Press, pp. 120-121.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 11.

then became the market strategy objective, as they were considered to be irrational and impulsive, easily manipulated by new ideas.¹⁵ One of the first definite examples aimed at generating false needs in children were some big American department stores with special children's departments. Since children have futile worries and continuous desires, they become a sort of guarantee for all the commercial businesses dedicated to them.¹⁶ The physical transformation of children was gradually seen as the creation of new needs and pushed towards new consumption.¹⁷ Childhood under the influence of this process acquired a new vocabulary and a new awareness of the processes of growth. Nevertheless, the theory according to which a person is seen as a passive agent of the market is not always approved. For example in 1960, the psychologist George Katona thought that the theory should be reversed. The consumer was indeed influenced by his/her social group but was able to influence the market and consumption in turn. Katona's theory restored the dignity to man who was no longer manipulated, but free and fully aware of his needs. In 2016 Frank Trentmann in *The Empire of things: How we became a world of consumers. From fifteenth century to twentieth-first*, gave new dignity to the very dimension of consumption. According to Trentmann, it was thanks to this that human society experienced evolution, without the use of consumption to seek and obtain social prestige. Whereas Katona changes his analysis on consumption, Trentmann seems to take a different direction, more serious than that taken by Katona. He sees children as consumers and not consumerists and this is the picture that emerges in interesting yet rather dated works such as Francois Mariet's *Lasciateli guardare la TV* (1992); Seymour Papert's *I bambini e il computer* (1994); According to these authors, when we speak about consumption, attention should be given to significant adults because they are able to filter reality and prevent children from absorbing innate traps along with valid messages from the language of television. Following this line of thought is the idea that the wish to consume is not synonymous of commodification, but it assumes its original dimension, as fundamental function for individual, personal and social development.

4. Education to consumption in Italy

In Italy, to talk about commodification of childhood, from a historical-educational perspective is to consider consumption studies from a merely general point of view. Thus in the work of Egle Becchi e Angelo Semeraro, *Archivi d'Infanzia. Per una storiografia della prima età* we can find the essay by Heinz Hengst – *Bambini, consumo e gap generazionale* (2001).¹⁸ Despite not being Italian, he shows a certain, yet limited interest for the history of consumption in Italy and considers three time spans to be significant: the post-war years, the 50s and 60s, when the affluent society was formed, the second period when American style purchasing started (the 60s and 70s), and the third starting in the 80s, when consumption became an integral part of daily life, marking the transformation of society into one of consumerism.¹⁹ According to Hengst, the changes in childhood behavior can be observed through the transformation of

¹⁵ Ivi, pp. 24-36.

¹⁶ Ivi, pp. 63-65.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 65.

¹⁸ H. Hengst (2001), *Bambini, consumo e gap generazionale* cit., pp. 107-126.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 108.

toys.²⁰ Previously, in the middle class, toys that children played with had to nurture moral health and stimulate learning, thus promoting a child's free initiative.²¹ In the 20th Century however, the consumerist culture ignores the educational function of toys and emphasizes their symbolic value. It became important to feed the children's desires, preventing them from being satisfied with second-hand toys.²²

The transformation of toys and their meaning has also been investigated by Antonio Santoni Rugiu in his work entitled *La Pedagogia del consumismo (e del letame)*, (2003).²³ In his essay he describes how global industry promotes specific categories of age and generation, weakening the parent's role and the giving the child greater and harmful freedom.²⁴ Santoni Rugiu's analysis of the influence of consumption over children criticizes advertised products that despite reaching their goals, mislead children and parents with a strategic label that says *educational*.²⁵

On the other hand, long before Santoni Rugiu, several pedagogists, such as Giovanni Maria Bertin, disapproved of Consumerist society. They considered it responsible for creating "free time", non-educational time for oneself, with the sole aim of commercialization and isolation from modern society.²⁶

Yet free time had also been the topic studied by Lamberto Borghi e Raffaele Laporta, who proposed not so much a refusal but more a new definition of free time, calling it a unique time – capable of combining amusement /creativity with education. Sociologist Simona Ironico observes the consumerist society with skepticism in a more recent essay untitled *Come i bambini diventano consumatori* (2010), unlike to the reflection by Bertin, Borghi, Laporta, she considers the socialization of consumption to be a process created and encouraged by the simulation of real life situations that the children simply live as moments of leisure. Choosing clothes or make-up items, or creating new styles and daily life contexts allow the internalization of well-defined roles: this process is known as transtoying.²⁷

Monica Parricchi in *Educazione al consumo* (2015), starting from the very definition of goods and consumption, expresses the importance of education in orienting new generations toward conscious and suitable choices for their well-being. Indeed, according to Parricchi, the educational objective of pedagogy is personal wellbeing.²⁸ Individuals must be able to take care of their own life plan, through the awareness of the characteristics of society, of which consumption is an integral part of.²⁹ The modern day consumer is the one whose life is subject to continuous re-definition, because social change also causes consumption change.³⁰

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 109.

²² P. Stearns (2006), *Consumerism in world history, the global transformation of desire*, Oxon, New York, p. 139.

²³ A. S. Rugiu (2003), *La pedagogia del consumismo (e del letame)*, cit.

²⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 117-121.

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 123.

²⁶ S. Oliviero (2017), *I consumi e la Storia dell'educazione*, in «Rivista di storia dell'educazione», n. 4, p.23.

²⁷ S. Ironico (2010), *Come i bambini diventano consumatori*, Laterza, Roma, pp. 7-9.

²⁸ M. Parricchi (2015), *Educazione al consumo. Per una pedagogia del benessere*, Franco Angeli, Milano.

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 19.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 25.

School, according to Parricchi, has an important role in educating on consumption: to promote teaching models based on interactions among students, team work and the principle of *learning by doing*.³¹ Only in this way is critical thinking reinforced and thus the capacity of conscious, well-reasoned choices, far from any manipulative process. Awareness of the influence of consumption on educational processes is even better defined by Stefano Oliviero's analyses. In his 2016 article indeed, we can read:

consumption, particularly during the twentieth Century, played a fundamental role in the development of society and its identity; contributing to a new definition of class structure, genders and generations. [...] Consumption deeply involves the educational field and so should be studied as an educational process, both in the past and present.³²

Consumption, despite emerging in the 60s, is not entirely part of the pedagogical discourse. The main limit is indeed represented by the weakness of pedagogy, which has always been involved in a scholastic context. [...] In a very recent research on the same subject, Oliviero emphasizes the existing connection between consumption and education in new generations. He effectively and concisely says:

[...] Consumption defines and has defined what we are and what we have been. It is an educational process that begins with the desire of material or immaterial goods. The passing to purchase and using it till to arrive to transform it in waste to be recycled. It is a continuous cycle that educates and trains people not only through direct experience, but also in an implicit way by means of the large baggage of positive and negative values, pertinent to the consumptions. An educational value that became more evident in the 20th Century with the expansion of consumptions and the birth of consumer society.

Italian Pedagogy, Oliviero says, has been indifferent towards the consumerist society, has rarely been in contact with it, choosing political and theoretical discussions on other subjects instead.³³ Nevertheless, a child, as a consumer, is one of the main aspects of modern culture. A child that cannot and must not be moved away from the real world, but should rather be helped to live with its contradictions.³⁴ So, to save a child from the process of commodification, one must accept that he/she has an active social role, trust in him/her and establish a relationship with his/her world. The child must not disappear from the public scene and must not reject the necessary technological development; he/she must be encouraged to improve personal skills, that have always been well known to advertisers, but not to many educators.³⁵ This is our wish for the present and future generations.

Conclusion

The commodification of childhood appears to be repeatedly confirmed as a theme waiting to fully develop in Italy. One often mistakes the importance of consumption – a

³¹ Ivi, p. 35.

³² S. Oliviero, *Lavoro, consumo e Formazione*, cit., pp. 125-133.

³³ Id. (2017), *Editoriale educazione, scuola e consumo*, in «Rivista di storia dell'educazione», n. 4, p. 10.

³⁴ E. Macinai (2017), *I diritti dei bambini nella società dei consumi. Protezione e partecipazione*, in «Rivista di storia dell'educazione», n. 4, p. 99.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

necessary activity for us-with consumerism, or rather the distortion of a need and an excessive activity. In this way, the educational value of consumption loses visibility and fails to emerge all its influence. Since my research has only just begun, its purpose was not only to introduce a matter of certain scientific interest, but most importantly to encourage reflection on a matter that affects our lives and individual choices daily, as parents, educators and training professionals. The attention and care which Stefano Oliviero has examined these topics have been fundamental both at the beginning of my work and now. He is able to combine historical depth – the main ingredient in research – with the passion of an academic who observes the constants and variables of life as time goes on, mixing all of these together with astounding intuition. The precise moment and way in which the phenomenon of childhood commodification appeared is still to be confirmed yet the hypothesis that there is a strong connection with the birth of the affluent society thus with the period from and after the Economic Boom. Whilst awaiting less immature results, one can only aspire to arouse a deeper interest in child education, particularly towards the things that we desire and consume daily.

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