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Recommended Citation

Jarvis, Peter (2007). "Everyday Learning in an Information Society: Towards a New Totalitarianism," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2007/roundtables/12>

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Everyday Learning in an Information Society: Towards a New Totalitarianism

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Abstract: It is argued here that capitalist society is a new form of totalitarianism without having the political power to enforce its will: through advertising and indoctrinational techniques we learn everyday to conform to its demands. How can critical adult education respond to this new condition?

In the West we tend to take for granted our freedom and democracy and look to Russia (USSR), to Nazi Germany and China for examples of totalitarianism. In each of these the totalism was political using both overt and covert power. People knew that they had to obey or else they would suffer since the state, by definition, had the right to use force. But we live in a new form of totalitarianism in which the exercise of power to enforce conformity is the use of psychological techniques through mass media moulding individual desire to generate conformity: a form of brainwashing that invades our negative freedom. We are always free to ignore the sources of the information – this is what makes this a new form of totalitarianism.

Part 1: The Nature of Society

In a global world, there is a common sub-structure (economic, technological – including information technology) supported by the military and political might of USA) around which each society has many layers – international, national, regional and local. Organisations and individuals can act in any or all of these levels (Jarvis, 2007).

While the core of global society does not have the legal right to use force to enforce its interests but it is supported by the political and military might of USA. Since the core also controls the economic, technology and information technology institutions it has legal access to many of the resources of covert power. But compared to the State, the capitalist sub-structure is potentially weak because it depends on consumers to purchase its products in order to survive: to do this it uses information technology to advertise and so it creates a global capitalist culture. This is the information society: the flip side of which is the learning society – there is so much information to be learned.

Webster (2002, p.154) makes the point that informational developments are central to the spread of consumerism necessary for capitalism to develop since they provide the means by which people are persuaded by corporations that it is both desirable and an inevitable way of life. Through a sustained information barrage, attests Schiller, ‘all spheres of human existence are subject to the intrusion of commercial values...the most important of which, clearly, is: CONSUME’ (Schiller, 1992, p.3 – cited from Webster) (Upper case in the original). Consumer capitalism is sustained by information technology: television is both a means of selling goods and services but it also bolsters the consumerist life-style; the bulk of the programmes encourage the same life-style; information and communications technology exacerbates the tendency of the market place to replace self and communal organisation; communications technologies allow a greater surveillance of the general public that enables the corporations to address their messages of persuasion to it. Since people are exposed to these

techniques of persuasion for much of their waking life, they are inevitably learning from them and constructing their own social realities.

Part 2: Everyday Learning

A comprehensive theory of learning has been discussed elsewhere (Jarvis, 2006) but learning is both experiential and existential: the whole person may learn in every situation. Learning is defined as a combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.

Learning is an on-going lifelong process whereby the whole person is exposed to the cultural environment through interaction – formally and informally- and through the media. It is through this process of socialisation that we, as individuals construct our own sense of reality which reflects of our own socially constructed culture. In this information society it would be true to say that people are more exposed to information than ever before in history but it is commonly accepted that the dominant ideas are those which are most frequently learned and in contemporary society, these are the ideas of global capitalism. Advertising is the dominant ideological apparatus of global capitalism: we are rarely presented with pictures of reality other than those manufactured by global capitalism – it is a totalitarian system into which we are indoctrinated.

Indoctrination has at least four dimensions: intentions of the purveyors of the information; content of the information; the relationship of the content to truth; the techniques employed to purvey that information. On each of these counts, advertising in contemporary Western society might be regarded as a form of brainwashing – starting with young children and continuing throughout the whole of life. A desire to purchase the commodities is created so that future adverts will be received by prepared and ready minds. We live in a totalistic society and through non-formal lifelong learning we are all exposed to these processes which inhibit our choice and ability to act freely. It is, therefore, a morally questionable process.

Conclusion

The question with which we are now confronted is – what can we as adult educators do about this situation?

References

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