

Artifact/Ideas and Parenting for Social Justice

In an essay entitled “Artifact/Ideas And Political Culture” Langdon Winner (1991) challenges just and peaceful citizens to consider the ways in which the development, adoption, and use of instrumental things affect our shared sense of freedom, power, authority, community, and justice. In his book, *Intermediate Man*, John Lachs (1981) introduces us to the concept of “machines that shield us” and their effects on our moral sensibility and sense of social responsibility. I propose we, as families and educators, accept Lachs’ insights as well as Winner’s challenge and consider the qualities of social, moral, and political life we create through the artifacts or objects we use in our daily lives.

Mediation

The first concept I’d like to discuss is that of mediation. Lachs defines mediation as “the performance of any action by some agent on behalf of another” (1978: 17). Any action is mediated when someone else does it for you—whether you request it or not. For example, if you ask someone to fix you a sandwich, and the individual does, that action is mediated. It is mediated because you got the sandwich without the experience of making it yourself. However, many actions that are performed on your behalf are not performed at your request. You may not have asked a company to produce the goods you buy, but the fact that you pay for the goods demonstrates that the company is working on your behalf. In short, any action that you request, pay for, or benefit from is done on your behalf. Lachs explains:

In this way, actions that range from the trivial to the most momentous, from the specifically contracted all the way to the generally available, are all mediated—that is, performed by one on behalf of and fre-

quently for the benefit of others. Almost all the actions necessary for life, for satisfaction, and for self-expression are mediated in industrial society. (1978: 17)

The most important characteristic of mediation is that the person who benefits from an action does not have the experience of performing the action—or of performing all the actions necessary to achieve the desired benefit. Lachs (1978) morally privileges this immediate experience as that from which responsibility grows. Thus we can see how too much mediation would lead to a diminishing sense of responsibility.

Mediation has four major consequences. The first is beneficial, the remaining three are costs. The beneficial consequence is our modern technical civilization. The quality of life and standard of living we enjoy all presuppose mediation. Imagine what your life would be like if you had to do everything for yourself from gathering and preparing food to creating shelter and fashioning your clothes. There would be little time left for any of the benefits of culture. However, Lachs (1978) wants us to understand that there is a cost to this mode of life.

Of the remaining three consequences, the first cost is the growing manipulation of people or the use of people as tools. When an act is mediated it means that someone else has performed that action for me. Thus there is a sense in which the person who performs that action is an instrument of my will. His or her body, mind, and energy are directed for some period of time towards fulfilling my desires. You can imagine how easy it might be for the person to become simply a means to having that desire fulfilled. There is so much mediation in society that we often cease to even think of the people that perform the actions that bring about the situations we desire. When this happens on a large scale, people begin to feel valued primarily for the tasks they perform. Thus, they may feel devalued as a human being. Lachs' (1978) point is that the more we forget about the people behind actions, the more we regard them as tools or inanimate objects. It is in this sense that our lives become depersonalized.

The second cost of mediation is the growing sense of passivity in our culture. The more we are defined by our roles, and the more others depend on us in those roles, the more uniform our actions must be. There is a sense in which we must be reliable, predictable, and almost interchangeable in our work. In each profession, there is a protocol for behaviour. The same is true in children's lives, for example, in schools. While there is room for variation, expectations are generally well understood and well observed. The more we are encouraged to follow established rules and norms, the less we are likely to recognize *ourselves* in the roles we fulfill. Our energies may become absorbed in meeting requirements and expectations in an attempt to fulfill our "obligations" or others' "expectations." When this happens we have surrendered to the role—becoming what the role demands of us.

The more we feel we are just following the rules or fulfilling requirements, the less likely we are to take responsibility for our actions. We may feel we have little choice in or control over what we do. If we feel our actions are already laid out for us by the role we play (student, spouse, parent, worker, etc.), then it is understandable that we might begin to respond passively in those roles. This passivity creates a feeling of impotence. We feel we are unable to positively change or have an effect on many of the things that are important to us because these things may depend on long, complicated chains of mediation.

The third negative consequence of mediation is what Lachs (1978) terms “psychic distance.” The chains of mediation in our society are so involved that we often forget—if we have ever known—what it fully means to cause the actions that benefit us. For example, psychic distance explains why we may buy, perhaps unaware but also without investigation, clothes and toys that were made in sweatshops or eat meat that we would not catch, kill, and prepare on our own. Psychic distance is the direct result of lack of firsthand experience. It reveals itself when we cannot accept the responsibility for actions that are clearly ours. It is made possible by all the people who stand between us and the consequences of our actions. Lachs writes:

Without firsthand acquaintance with his actions, even the best of men moves in a moral vacuum; the abstract recognition of evil is neither a reliable guide nor an adequate motive. If we keep in mind the psychic distance between the agent and his act, along with its source in impoverished personal experience, we shall not be surprised at the immense and largely unintentional cruelty of men of good will. The mindless indifference of what is sometimes called “the system” is in reality our indifference. It springs from our inability to appropriate acts as our own and thus assume responsibility for them—along with our bland perceptual life sheltered from encounter with evil. We do not know the suffering that is caused and cannot believe that *we* are the ones who cause it. (1978: 18)

How can we avoid psychic distance? Mediation cannot be abandoned. As we have seen, our society depends upon it. Rather, we must seek to ameliorate its effects. This means becoming invested in our daily activities in a real and immediate way. It means doing more things for ourselves when we can, and familiarizing ourselves with the things others are doing for us. It means fully participating in and taking responsibility for choices we consign as well as those we make.

Santa’s sweatshop

Let’s look at a practical example of how the chain of mediation might influence our families, and how we can remedy that. Toys are a subject near and dear to most childrens’ hearts, and as the holidays gift giving season approaches

choosing and shopping for toys reaches its height. The American people spend \$20.7 billion a year on toys, with more than half of these purchases made during the holiday season. Nearly 80 percent of the toys we purchase each year in the United States are imports, and 63 percent are from China (U.S. State Department Report on China, 1997).

A survey conducted by US News and World Report shows that while Americans are concerned that their children's toys may have been produced by someone else's child, mother or father in working conditions we would consider unfair, we are much more concerned with the cost and quality of the item. Some 58.5% of us always consider the cost of an item when making a purchase and 67.8% of us consider the quality, while only 15.9 percent of us consider the labour conditions under which the toy was made. And, our concern has a price. Nearly 90% of Americans when asked stated that they would pay a few cents more for a product they knew was made under fair working conditions, but only 70% would pay a few dollars more (Telenation Survey, 1996).

This is mediation and psychic distance at work. Presumably, none of us would be willing to have our own children perform sweatshop labour, nor would we want to do the work ourselves. Conditions in Chinese factories, for example, include 60-96 hour work weeks, 10-to-15-hour shifts, six to seven days a week for wages of 13 to 28 cents an hour, without benefits. Some of the most popular brands of clothes for kids are created under similarly dismal conditions. The Esprit label, for example, is the result of shifts of labour that last from 7:30 a.m. to midnight, seven days a week and pay 13 cents an hour. If we shop at Kmart, we are endorsing 70-hour workweeks for 28 cents an hour. JC Penny shoppers demand eleven-hour shifts, seven days a week for 18 cents an hour.¹ Few of us would overtly condone anyone doing such labour. Yet, when we buy toys or clothes made in sweatshops or when we are uninformed of the origin and conditions under which the toys we buy were made, we are in fact deriving benefit from, and therefore are responsible for, that labour.

Putting the joy back into Christmas

What can we, as parents interested in peace and social justice do to ensure that we are not a part of the chain of mediation that binds workers to machinery for 12 hours a day or more?

1. *Reduce or eliminate chains of mediation.* Make toys and games instead of buying them, and involve children in these projects. Or, buy toys from local craftspeople or artisans and involve your child in learning how the toy was made.

2. *Explore the origins of toys.* Involve your child in finding out the history of a toy. How has it evolved? Include in this history a "family tree" of the toy. Where was it made? By whom? Under what conditions? With the wealth of information available on the internet, parents now have many resources for verifying purchases. For example, see the Responsible Shopping Guide published by Global Exchange (<http://www.globalexchange.org/economy/corpo>-

rations/sweatshops/ftguide.html). If you can't find the information you are looking for, talk to your child about whether it's a good idea to choose that toy given that you don't know where it came from or how it was made. Is there another toy that you could adopt that you know more about?

3. *Voice your concerns to manufacturers and retailers.* Sit down with your child and write a letter, or take your child with you to talk to a retailer about your concerns. You can teach her about the importance of active involvement as well as model positive conflict resolution skills.

4. *Support the Campaign for Corporate Disclosure.* You have a right to know what's in the food you eat. You also have a right to know the social ingredients of the toys your children are playing with. Hold manufacturers responsible for truthful and complete disclosure through labels that reveal, for example, the factory in which a toy was assembled.

In short, teach your children that it is wrong to consume items unless we can say "yes" to each action that has produced that item. Shortening the chain of mediation is a sure pathway to peace.

Artifact/ideas

For critics of technology, the idea that we are on an irrevocable technological path—that *we cannot scale back*—indicates a loss of freedom and autonomy which is incompatible both with democratic decision making and democratic life. In his essay "Artifact/Ideas and Political Culture," Langdon Winner (1991) outlines an approach for examining the moral and political values that are inherent in the artifacts or objects we adopt. He also outlines a democratic process for making decisions about technological design and reform.

While noting that this is a time of great technological optimism, Winner (1991) is also concerned about the ways in which advancing technologies are changing our communal and political life. Winner suggests that when we face technological changes, whether as individuals, families, communities, or nations, we usually focus upon three questions:

First: How will the technology be used? (What are its functions and practical benefits?)

Second: How will the technology change the economy? (What will it contribute to the production, distribution, and consumption of material wealth?)

Third: How will the technology affect the environment? (What will its consequences be for global climate change, pollution of the biosphere, and other environmental problems?) (1991: 43)

While each of these questions is important, Winner argues that there is an even more important question that is seldom asked: "What kind of world are

we building here?” With this question Winner is challenging us to look beyond an instrumentalist view of the artifacts we use. He asks us to reflect on the values we endorse and perpetuate by the adoption of particular technologies. More specifically he wants us to ask whether we are creating a world that will cultivate and honour human dignity and human relationships. “In what ways,” Winner (1991) questions, “do the development, adoption and use of instrumental things affect our shared experience of freedom, power, authority, community and justice? How might we respond creatively to the role technology plays in contemporary political life?”

Consider the example of the car. The car has become a symbol of freedom for many Americans. We are free to travel privately. We are free to travel to suit our schedules. Many of us feel a greater freedom in our choices of where to live and work. Many people think nothing of living distances greater than thirty miles from their place of employment. However, upon closer inspection we see that the car symbolizes other things as well. The car symbolizes our sense of entitlement to natural resources. Cars are expensive and symbolize status and power. They also symbolize the privileging of the private over the public. Many people feel they “have” to have a car because towns and cities are increasingly organized around automobile travel rather than public transportation. The town square and public markets are overwhelmed by suburbs and strip malls. These developments change the character of community life and experience.²

Winner (1991) writes, “Our useful artifacts reflect who we are, what we aspire to be.” We cannot separate ourselves from the technologies we embrace: they are a statement about who we are and what we believe in. In a visitor’s pamphlet entitled, “The Guide to the Amish Country,” the author explains why the Amish don’t drive cars:

Why don’t the Amish drive cars? Because the Amish believe that cars pull people apart, and that a car distorts its owner’s sense of self-importance in a world where humility is a necessary virtue.

Much of our life is dependent on technologies, and these technologies in turn shape the form of that life. Winner urges us to be aware of the symbiotic nature of this relationship. We create technologies, and they in turn create us. This relationship makes it critical that we examine the technologies we adopt. In a very real sense, in adopting them we are making ourselves over in their images.

In order to better understand this claim, Winner (1991) asks us to consider the world from the point of view of the artifacts we use. Many artifacts that once had a purely instrumental role now function as members of society. The car is only one example of this. People often say, for example, “We are a two-car family.” People often name their cars and have a strong sentimental attachment to them. We attend to the fueling, cleanliness, maintenance, and insurance of cars much like the feeding, bathing, clothing, medical care, and financial

planning for children or other family members.

In adopting the car we have adopted a culture. One out of every four meals is eaten in the car. Commuters put in an average of ten 40-hour work weeks in the car each year, and commuting to work accounts for less than one-fourth of our trips and only 22.5% of traffic. Nearly eight of every ten auto miles are errands. One-third of the miles we travel is due to family chores, one-third is social and recreational, 22.5 percent is community, and eight per cent is vacations (Kay, 1997: 11-23).

Even if our uses of technologies are initially instrumental—we want to move heavy loads, get there faster, be protected from the weather—we find that there are secondary and tertiary consequences that are often both unintended and unforeseeable. For example, the deterioration of inner cities as people moved to the suburbs is an unintended consequence of the use of cars. So is the increasing isolation of those who are too young, too old, or physically unable to drive. The amount of social contact we have and desire, the amount of physical labour in which we engage, and the frequency of travel are all examples of changes in our form of life which result directly and indirectly from uses of technology.

Telephones, answering machines, televisions, and computers are other interesting examples of tools that have taken on multiple social roles in our culture. The answering machine, Winner (1991) points out by way of example, does much of the work formerly delegated to a full-time secretary. Rather than answer the phone ourselves, ask someone else to do it, or (gulp) actually miss calls, we interpose another machine between ourselves and people who are attempting to reach us. It is also not uncommon for callers to be flustered when an actual person answers the phone. Comments like “I thought I’d get your machine” or “I was just going to leave a message” are increasingly frequent. The same is true of business calls. More and more often customers are confronted with a series of electronic menus to negotiate before there exists any hope of speaking with a real person. Ironically, not only are companies unembarrassed by the impersonal nature of these menus, but the menus are often introduced as “for your convenience”!

Although not minimizing the benefits of technology, Winner reminds us that there is a political world embodied in technology. Just as political positions can be expressed in words, so too are they expressed in material objects. Material objects indicate our place in society, define standards and norms, outline possibilities, and determine who and what are excluded from public life. The adage “Actions speak louder than words” is usefully applied to our use of technology. In light of this fact, we must seek to understand whether or not the world we create through our use of technology is primarily peaceful and just. Too often, if we explore the artifacts in our homes, we find their hidden messages to be out of step with our own moral convictions

What does this mean in practical terms? 1) As in reducing chains of mediation, we need to get to know the artifact/ideas we have adopted into our

homes. Explore the idea of items as symbols and investigate with children what they stand for when deciding to use or purchase an item, or participate in a system. 2) If an item does not reflect your family's values, involve children in creative solutions for reform or replacement.

Winner leaves us with a challenge: we must decide whether we will use our artifacts and techniques to maximize human freedom or restrain it. He writes:

If ordinary citizens are to be empowered in shaping the world to come, we must become very skillful in areas where we are now profoundly ignorant: using ideas and abilities that enable us to define and realize human freedom and social justice within the realm of technology itself.... If we cannot develop these skills or do not care to, if we fail to confront the world-shaping powers that new technologies present, then human freedom and dignity could well become obsolete remnants of a bygone era. (1991:49)

Parenting for peace

In this essay, I have tried to show that the every day items in our homes, and our every day activities communicate to our children a sense of the normal and the fair, and manifest our social consciousness. Using the examples of toys and cars, I hope to have shown that the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the technologies and techniques that keep us warm, and dry and comfortable are physical embodiments of our ethical ideals.³ Teaching our children to seek the idea behind the artifact, and to be sure that they could say “yes” to each aspect of that artifact’s production teaches them to take individual responsibility for social justice. We can heighten the moral sensibilities of children (as well as our own) by excavating the social and political messages contained in “everyday” things. I believe that as families we should strive to understand the values revealed by the items we use, and should compare these values to our own self-stated moral beliefs. In those cases where we find that we are adopting artifacts that are out of step with our own values, I suggest we engage in creative means to change or eliminate those consumptions. In so doing we will not only educate and empower children for social justice, but we will also foster a life long ability to mitigate the messages of a “consumer culture” in favour of an active and participatory citizenship which promotes peace and nurtures dignity.

¹Statistics compiled by the National Labour Committee.

²For an excellent, extended discussion of this subject see *Asphalt Nation* by Jane Holtz Kay (1997).

³I am indebted to ARM’s reviewers who have rightly pointed out that this appeal for heightened consciousness seems to be most appropriately aimed at that class of consumers who have both the time and access to resources to research the means of production of the items they consume. Even for those fortunate

enough to have access to such resources the information concerning the moral elements of an artifact's production may be difficult to find.

I'd like to say first that as a starting point in calling attention to Winner's (1991) message I am addressing an audience that is "invested in consumption." In other words, there is a class of consumers that is responsible for a disproportionate amount of consumption and yet this same class of consumers generally has both the educational background and resources necessary to make those consumption ethical. Where information cannot be found regarding consumption, I argue that a consumer must consider that fact itself to be ethically relevant and ask, "What does it mean to bring an item into my home when I cannot find out the morally relevant facts concerning its history and production?" I suggest that in these cases we might choose to forgo this item, or substitute one whose history is less obscure. At the same time, we have an obligation to lobby for disclosure from all manufacturers as to the circumstances of an artifact's production. This might take the form of supporting legislation that demands labeling which accurately reflects the production history of an item and its components. Accurate and revealing labeling further addresses a second concern: how do people who do not have access to resources such as those on the internet find the information they need and deserve to make ethical choices? Regardless of class we are all consumers, and all deserve the opportunity to make choices that are in line with our ethical principles. Putting more of the burden on manufacturers to disclose means of production, without eschewing our own responsibilities as consumers, is one way to make ethical consumption more practically accessible to consumers of all classes.

Finally, it must be admitted that these goals are "regulative ideals." In other words, all of us will occasionally consume items whose origins are not completely known to us—yet we will be better, more moral, and more democratic consumers in so far as we strive to make choices that are not only informed but are consistent with our moral views. If we allow Winner's (1991) and Lach's (1981, 1978) ideas to regulate and guide our decisions I believe we are traveling along an ethical path and making that path more accessible to others. I feel strongly that we cannot let the fact that we may not always have enough information, or that the information is not yet as available to all as it should be stop us from committing ourselves to a course of consumption that is compatible with parenting for peace and social justice.

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