

## Costruire un mondo inadatto alla vita: raggiro, distrazione e disconoscimento della perversione

### Building a World Unfit to Live in: the Deception, Distraction and Disavowal of the Fetish

Alan Bainbridge

*Questo articolo suggerisce l'ipotesi che l'impatto della violenza neoliberale sull'educazione abbia promosso lo sviluppo dell'apprendimento come un feticcio. È dentro questo contesto che l'apprendimento umano, la capacità di rispondere e non semplicemente di cercare di controllare, è in pericolo di distruzione. Il contesto di degrado ambientale e, particolarmente, l'abbattimento di tassi in Inghilterra, porta in evidenza il fatto che l'abilità di imparare, di pensare è stata tristemente svuotata. Si vuole qui affermare che l'educazione è emersa da azioni violente ed è strettamente connessa alla violenza. Perché l'apprendimento si realizza il soggetto in apprendimento deve confrontarsi con l'interruzione tra ciò che è già conosciuto e come questa conoscenza o abilità deve essere modificata per adattarsi a nuove condizioni. Similmente, il ruolo dell'insegnante/genitore è quello di offrire una forte scossa che richiede una risposta dal soggetto in apprendimento.*

*This account proposes that the impact of secondary neoliberal violence on education has promoted the development of learning as a fetish. It is within this context that human learning, the ability to respond to and not simply seek to control, is in danger of being destroyed. The context of environmental degradation and particularly the English badger cull, provide evidence that the ability to learn, to think has been sadly depleted. This paper makes the claim that education has emerged from violent acts and has violence inherent within it. For learning to take place the learner must be confronted with a disruption between what is already known and how this knowledge or skill base must be modified to adapt to the new conditions. Likewise, the role of the teacher/parent is to offer a violent disruption that requires a response from the learner.*

**Parole chiave:** merce feticcio, neoliberista, nicchia ecologica

**Keywords:** Commodity Fetish, Neoliberal, Ecological Niche

*Articolo ricevuto: 23 gennaio 2016*

*Versione finale: 25 febbraio 2016*

#### CONTEXT: ECOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

The early stages of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century do not provide a very optimistic outlook regarding the impact of human activity on the non-human world. Although there are some detractors most commentators would, either in the present or comparatively near future, acknowledge both the local and global violent degradation of natural environments. Global examples would include the impact of climate change, peak oil (and other fossil fuel) extraction and the rapidly increasing shift towards hydraulic fracturing to obtain natural gas and exploitation of oil sand reserves. While, from a more 'local', English context (Lovegrove, 2008), wild flower meadows have declined by 98% since the onset of industrialisation, only 2% of native woodland remains and despite mounting scientific evidence and opposition from veterinary groups (Cassidy, 2012), the UK government continues a policy to shoot (or to cull) badgers in an attempt to reduce the incidence of Bo-

vine Tuberculosis (Bovine TB) in dairy cattle. This is a depressing roll-call, of at best ineffective stewardship, or at worst a conscious rejection of the impact of human activities and as such solicits an answer to the deceptively difficult question – 'Why is it so hard to acknowledge and change the negative impact of human violence on the non-human world?'

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores what education may well be and how violence can be conceived as an inherent constituent of this process and in turn how difficult decisions relating to human stewardship towards the planet are made. As a consequence the focus shall be on the relationship between the human and non-human world and in particular the role of education in creating and maintaining human world-making. The process of and potential sites for learning and decision-making, in particular the role of 'formal' education and then wider 'informal' arenas for public debate will be discussed. It will first be noted how the global influence of neo-liberal agendas has led to a commodification of formal educational settings and ultimately more public spaces. Which, despite the rhetoric of market force driven improvement agendas, accountability and imposed standards, these educational spaces are now less likely to be able to support the sustained and often difficult thinking that is required to solve complex problems, including: issues of environmental degradation and potentially catastrophic climate change. The second point of departure is to consider within the context of the policy in England to cull badgers by shooting them, the notion of violence and to question the impact this has on human agency, learning and world making. By focusing on this particularly violent and nonsensical act, attention can be drawn to how individual decision making and wider societal responses have been subsumed within a neoliberal culture of market forces, that ultimately lead to the literal death of badgers and the metaphorical death of learning.

The claim I make here is that education, is by its very nature, an act of violence and the argument put forward here will detail how this provocative idea can be sustained from birth to the development of formal education settings. Additionally, the exploration of educational violence allows the consequence(s) of the dysfunctional relationship between the human and non-human to be exposed and thought about. It is also important to note that the process of education and the learning that this involves is conceived as being life-wide and life-long and including both informal and formal aspects of education. One final caveat that is required before this analysis can get under way is to make the case that this paper is to focus on 'human learning' and to distinguish this from the simplistic notions of behaviourist and constructivist learning that can equally be applied to non-human animals.

The central proposition is that early learning is grounded in violence: initially experienced in the traumatic expulsion from the womb into the outside world and then situated within the aggressive and hateful responses of the envious infant as they seek to understand a complex world. The debate will then develop the notion of how formal education is an example of human niche construction that continues to exact violence within education. I shall outline my claim that 'formal' education is an example of niche construction with inherent and yet unexpected violence and then why current conceptions of learning are premised on violent actions. Finally, I will suggest that violence within education is both unavoidable and paradoxically, necessary for effective teaching and learning.

I shall also be considering the sites and process of education alongside identifying violent actions by using notions of the fetish from both Marx (1867) and Freud (1927). Such a stance will enable complex problems, like the impact of human activity on the environment, to be interrogated from the micro perspective of the individual alongside the macro of wider social and political structures. I develop Marx's notion of the commodity fetish, where human-made products, take on their own and often beguiling agency. In particular, the concept of the commodity fetish is extended to include the human-made product of formal education which will be discussed in the light of an ever increasing separation between humans and the non-human world – itself also an act of violence. Additionally, Freud's conception of the fetish, one that deals with the anxiety inherent in real or fantasised loss, shall be presented so that the construction of human commodities, the subsequent emerging fetish and disruption to thinking are located within a framework of unconscious defences that seek to protect the individual from overwhelming anxiety. It is at this nexus of separation that the violence of the fetish is manifest: where it deceives, distracts and incites disavowal and therefore obfuscates the relationship between human and non-human, education and learning and violence and non-violence.

#### EDUCATIONAL VIOLENCE ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

Human brains are not radically different from those of their closest primate relatives (Howard-Jones, 2014) and yet the dominance of humans in almost every ecological niche on the planet suggests that there is something significant about the social and cultural world that humans inhabit. The gestation period for humans and chimpanzees is about nine months for both species and their early dependency on primary caregivers is also similar for the first two to three years. What begins to distinguish humans from all other animals is how long their period of dependency lasts and without trivialising the debate it can be suggested that immature humans require adult support for almost twenty years. It is within this extended period of utter dependency on a '(m)other' that the infant begins to

experience life through acts of violence and although these may not be overly brutal or shocking, they are never-the-less experiences of violence. The birth of an infant involves significant trauma as the sudden expulsion from the environment of the womb to the 'outside' world submits the infant to rapid changes in temperature, light and sound along with changes to major organ functions. Therefore the first interaction with a (m)other, where skin touches skin and eyes gaze into each other, is also associated with inevitable shock. This observation is not presented as negative: it is very much what it is and represents the beginnings of life outside the womb. The many years of nurturing that now commence involve a dyadic dance (Stern, 2000) between (m)other and infant in an attempt to understand each other - but no matter how gentle, more often than not, it is the (m)other's will that is imposed on the child as s/he is nurtured into the socially and culturally acceptable human world.

Just as an extended period of dependency is vital for successful human functioning so too is the requirement to separate and become an individual. Object Relation theorists such as Melanie Klein (1957), have each recorded the difficult and often violent psychic work that is necessary to begin the educational process that enables the infant to move from a position of total dependence towards one of independent maturity. For Klein, the most significant aspect of early learning is focussed on the infant's aggressive responses, initially, those of envy and hate which are directed towards the object of the breast, that at times can be experienced as nurturing but also, when it is withheld, as punishing. The Kleinian early educational act requires a move from dependence to independence and this involves the infant reconciling their violent and often attacking envious desires towards the breast and the goodness it provides: to accepting that the breast and the (m)other, can be both good and bad. Consequently, Klein's conceptualisation of early psychic processes provides two developmental positions: the paranoid-schizoid, where envy and aggression lead to separating objects into good or bad and the depressive position, where the infant has learnt to manage their aggressive envy and to engage with a more complex world of objects that are both good and bad. Once greater human autonomy has been learnt the possibility of acting on the wider outside world becomes an increasing possibility.

Berger and Luckmann's (1996) famous treatise on human world construction acknowledges that humans, in an attempt to make meaning build both physical and psychological worlds. They do so, as humans, unlike other animals are born into an 'open world', one that they are not initially adapted for and therefore have to make a world suitable for human thriving. Conversely, other animals, such as dogs and badgers, are born into 'closed worlds' to which they are ideally adapted. The relentless human compulsion to continually be involved in world making is explained by Berger's (1967) additional observation that, ironically, the products of human world making (physical and psychological) have their own internal logic that will in turn confound human functioning. If formal education

is viewed within this context it can be seen as an attempt to construct a process (education) that will lead to human meaning making. And yet, the project is never complete as the product's own logic returns to violently disrupt the process it originally intended to complete. Beista (2013) also recognises the violence within formal education but his view does not only consider the violence of education on the learner but additionally, the violence of education towards the 'other'. For Beista, current behaviourist and constructivist conceptions of learning are focussed on humans imposing themselves on the world in an aggressive attempt to control and understand. The conclusion to be drawn at this stage is that education is both produced and maintained by violence and that education and violence necessarily co-exist.

#### ESCALATION OF VIOLENCE AND THE FETISH

The following section continues to explore the relationship between violence and education and notes that the impact of neoliberal accountancy agendas in recent years have led to learning becoming a fetish, with the 'magical' ability to hide from view the ultimate act of aggression – the imminent death of learning. For Cixous (1977/1991) the mere process of naming is an act of primary violence that robs an abstraction of its meaning; in the case of education, the words education, learning and teaching are devoid of the richness and complexity of the processes these names represent. Furthermore, a secondary level of violence is represented by the neoliberal enterprise to use metrics to account for educational outcomes and it is from within this secondary act of violence that leads to a discussion of the origin, nature and outcome of the fetish.

#### ORIGIN AND NATURE OF FETISH

##### **A Macro Distraction - Use Value and Exchange Value**

The work of Berger offered an insight into how, based on the continual need for world construction, the nature of human products interrupts human functioning. Almost 100 years before *The Sacred Canopy*, Marx (1867) also alluded to the confrontational nature of human made products and termed the notion of the 'commodity fetish'. Marx distinguishes between the use and exchange value of a commodity: the use value is the matter-of-fact physicality and usefulness of a commodity for example, a metal axe is simply a piece of wood and metal that can be used to chop trees. While the exchange value is unknown until the maker of the axe exchanges this product, the wood and metal thing, for money or other products. It is in the conversion from use value to exchange value that Marx articulates his understanding of how and why commodities distract their human owners and become the site of fetishized behaviours.

For Marx (1867), the violence of the fetish is exposed in a market economy where it hides from awareness the exploitation of social relations and resources involved in commodity production. Although the fetish may have various origins the outcome, where the exchange value subsumes the use value is strikingly similar. When considering the axe, the use value of the metal and wood effectively becomes hidden, along with the labour that went into the sourcing and production of the metal, carving of the wood and the final construction of the axe, in favour of an exchange value that 'magically' distracts from the use value. It is Freud's (1927) understanding of the fetish that provides a possible psycho-social mechanism that can explain how individuals can be distracted, resulting in the exchange value exorcising the use value from awareness.

### **A Micro Disavowal - Dealing with Separation and Loss**

The fetish is a provocative and well-known feature of Freudian psychology bound up in immediate assumptions relating to sexual activity and this is where Freud first introduces the idea of the fetish (Freud, 1905). The presentation of fetishised behaviours in the clinical space at first surprised Freud but later (1927) he considered the role of the fetish in everyday life and this movement in his thinking provides an opportunity to consider how the fetish operates at an individual level. The sexual fetish has its origins, in males, after becoming aware that females do not possess a phallus, which in turn leads to an assumed fear of castration. By Freud's 1927 paper, 'Fetishism', his ideas now deal with loss in a wider social world and not just of castration. Grounded in a fear of loss the fetish develops as a refusal to perceive unacceptable reality and therefore the ego splits to support the possibility of maintaining two contrasting views. A state of mind referred to as 'disavowal'. The 'Freudian' fetish therefore has its origin in a fear of the violence of separation and how to avoid the anxiety associated with this.

This paper began by highlighting examples of environmental mismanagement and questioned how this situation has arisen. The platform that has been set out enables this complex issue to be discussed in the context of both Marx and Freud's understanding of fetishized human responses. The next section will argue why education settings have become sites of an aggressive fetish and further suggest what the consequences and outcomes are for human learning and efficacious decision making.

## THE FETISHISATION OF EDUCATION

### **Education as a fetish - the micro**

The consequence of being born into an 'open-world' has required humans to continually construct and control their environment: acts which are inherently about learning and result in the continual separation from the non-human world.

As humans have evolved and become increasingly social the 'original' sites of learning represented by (m)other/infant or close family relationships have been developed into social and cultural spaces such as formal education settings. Using Berger's (1967) principles of human world construction and the ensuing unintended conflict caused by the internal logic of physical and non-physical products, education can be regarded as an historical and continued separation between the learner and teacher as well as the human and non-human world. The observation to be made here is that the evolution of learning spaces represents a fracture from close relationships with others and the non-human world. Therefore engendering feelings of loss and setting up the conditions for Freud's psychoanalytic view that the fetish has its origin in dealing with loss and how this anxiety is managed by disavowal.

### **Education as a fetish – the macro**

That education processes and structures are products of human world-making is beyond doubt but these products have taken on a new significance in England within the recent neo-liberal climate of accountability, league tables and paying for higher education. Ball (2004) famously declared that education was 'for sale' and accordingly now a commodity functioning within a market economy: and as Harvey (2003) considered hardware, software and organisational forms to be sites of the fetish, so, on a macro scale education can be conceived as a commodity fetish. This results in the predicted conflation between use value and exchange value by hiding from awareness the exploitation of social relations and resources. In the context of education it can be argued that the fetish has led to individuals' experience of learning undergoing a violent shift from one that requires relationships to support difficult thinking and sustained effort to one that assumes learning is the result of attendance, completion of tests or scanning Google pages.

By taking a far ranging, micro and macro, interpretation of the origin and nature of the fetish it has been possible to identify how the products of human world-making have their own logic. And consequently, how these *deceive* from their original function and cause commodities to hide from awareness use value and create a *distraction* that focuses on exchange value and finally how individuals *disavow* reality and seem willing to cling onto opposing and unrealistic opinions. In general the fetish can be seen to 'magically' obscure the social relations between human/non-human, education/learning, learning/non-learning, use value/exchange value and violence/non-violence. It will be through the lenses of deception, distraction and disavowal that the violent outcomes of the education fetish, using the example of badger culling, may provide some insight into how worlds can be built unfit to live in.

## OUTCOMES OF THE FETISH

### **Deception**

The commodification of formal education has developed a hegemonic acceptance as to how learning is perceived to take place. Certainly from the English perspective the widespread application of a 'levels'-based curriculum with associated high-stakes testing, inspection by offices of the government and publication of performance league tables, has led to learning being simplified into assumed logical stages where the source of motivation for learners and teachers is linked to the results of audit. For numerous commentators (i.e. Biesta, 2013) this over-technicised approach to education does not represent what human learning might actually involve and at its best might only go some way towards surface learning. As previously discussed, the product of education has its own internal logic that creates a deception and precipitates human reactions that are further removed from what might be the relational sites of learning. On a simplistic level the result of the fetish is to deceive learners into a shallow style of short-term goal focussed thinking that falls short of the difficult thinking required for deeper learning.

The deception that shallow thinking is indicative of human learning and decision making can be exposed in the response of the UK government to cull badgers. Despite the evidence of 30 senior professors (Culling badgers could increase the problem of TB in cattle. 14<sup>th</sup> October, 2012) such actions results from simplistic thinking, in this case that large mobile and wide ranging mammals like badgers can be controlled within a very small geographical area. The deception inherent in the internal logic of a 'local' cull is that localised badgers are divorced from other 'quasi-local' badgers and that the destruction of badgers groups from these areas will reduce TB incidence in dairy cattle. The folly for those who propose such actions is to not consider, that the setts they destroy are part of a large, complex and inter-related ecosystem, the badgers shot are likely to be the old, ill and inexperienced animals and that successful non-violent TB eradication policies in other countries have been ignored. What has emerged from the violence bestowed on education by neoliberal policies is the interruption of thinking, leading in this context to an unnecessary violent act in a vain attempt to control the complex non-human world.

### **Distraction**

Audit based education process and structure has encouraged shallow thinking and a localised badger cull represents the operationalization of this policy resulting in humans being deceived that shallow thinking can lead to appropriate learning and decision making. Aligned alongside the deceptive influence of the fetish is the ability to imbue products with 'magical powers' that distract and hide from awareness the substitution of exchange value for use value. In the context of ed-

ucation and learning; schemes, curricula, testing, monitoring, observation and publication of performance league tables have all taken on magical powers of 'quick-fix' solutions. The surface learning and shallow thinking outlined above are deceptions that significant learning is taking place, while the increasingly technical approach to education distracts from the challenging nature of 'thought-full thinking' and deep learning. The assumption is, for example, that a logical curriculum with associated testing *will* lead to significant learning. It is the violent outcome of the fetish that has hidden from perception the considerable and complex nature of engaging learners in dealing with difficult knowledge.

The distraction that results from the commodification of education and badgers (people were paid to shoot badgers due to their economic impact on the dairy industry) is centred on the premise that humans can dominate and control the natural world - while what is hidden from awareness is the complex and more realistic ecology of badgers and the politics of rural life. Shooting badgers distracts from having to grapple with difficult issues such as; the impact of human farming procedures on habitats established by millennia of evolution, providing adequate fencing to discourage badgers, monitoring the movement of dairy cattle and addressing well established negative views on badgers and their impact on humans (Cassidy, 2012). The magical power of the fetish is in the delusion that localised shooting is required to solve the global problem of TB incidence in dairy cattle, while, of course, maintaining a position of political power. What has occurred is that (local) politicians have substituted the use value of badgers (ie as animals part of an existing ecosystem disrupted by human farming practices) with the exchange value of badgers (i.e. that killing badgers offers the possibility of being voted into a position of power). Of course, this entire process is supported by the impact of the fetishistic approach to education that, unknowingly, destroys sustained and difficult thinking, instead supporting shallow thinking and surface learning while distracting from dealing with difficult knowledge.

### **Disavowal**

Another impact of the fetish is to encourage disavowal as a response to dealing with the anxiety that results from a sense of separation or loss where there is a tension between reality and unconscious desire. The development of formal education practices have removed humans from original relational sites of learning and Howard-Jones (2015) makes the observation that human social and cultural development has outstripped the evolutionary ability of the brain to adapt to these changes. This disparity of development, the socio-cultural and the physical, has led to what Glendinning (1995) refers to as an 'untenable violation' that has in turn increased human anxiety and poor mental health. It was Freud's re-evaluation of the fetish that considered the defence of disavowal where feelings associated with the experience of loss and separation give rise to the ability to hold unrealistic and conflicting thoughts. In the context of education and learn-

ing this enables learners to inhabit a position where they perceive themselves to be knowledgeable and yet at the same time, unconsciously, to be disquieted by a sense of not knowing. For example, a student could obtain top marks for a test and yet also feel as though they did not deserve this and that there is still knowledge that they do not have. The converse can also apply to teachers ie that top test scores mean they were great practitioners and their students are geniuses, while sensing that test scores do not represent the full aspect of human learning.

The decision to cull badgers represents the potential impact of disavowal on human learning for the decisions that have been made do not reflect current well established knowledge. A whole host of evidence concludes that the policy to cull badgers will be unsuccessful and yet it remains on the statute books. Despite a government that continually calls for 'evidence-based' practice, those responsible for the decision to shoot badgers have been able to rationalise their conflicting (and assumingly unrealistic) thoughts. Cassidy (2012) notes that the decision might be rooted in deeply held cultural narratives and while this might be the case, the inability to engage in difficult and complex thinking is an indictment on how educational process have prepared the population to manage complex decision making.

## CONCLUSION

Education has emerged from violent acts and has violence inherent within it and although at one level disturbing, this is an accurate representation of how human learning operates. By definition for learning to take place the learner must be confronted with a disruption between what is already known and how this knowledge or skill base must be modified to adapt to the new conditions (Bainbridge and West, 2012; Beista, 2013). Likewise, the role of the teacher/parent is to offer a violent disruption that requires a response from the learner. What this account has proposed is that the impact of further secondary neoliberal violence on education has promoted the development of learning as a fetish. It is within this context that human learning, the ability to respond to and not simply seek to control, is in danger of being destroyed. The context of environmental degradation and particularly the English badger cull, provide evidence that the ability to learn, to think has been sadly depleted.

## REFERENCE

BAINBRIDGE, A. AND WEST, L., Introduction: minding the gap. In Bainbridge, A. and West, L. (eds.). *Psychoanalysis and Education: minding a gap* (pp. 11-36). Karnac, London 2012.

- BALL, S.J. (2004). *Education for Sale! The commodification of everything*. Annual Education Lecture, Institute of Education, University of London. Retrieved from <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/education/Events/events-files/AnnualEdLecture2004.pdf>.
- BIESTA, G.J.J., *The Beautiful Risk of Education*. Paradigm Publishers, Boulder and London 2013.
- BERGER, P.L., *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion*. Anchor Books, New York 1967.
- BILLIG, M. (1999). Commodity Fetishism and Repression: reflections on Marx, Freud and the Psychology of Consumer Capitalism, *Theory and Psychology*, 9 (3), p.313-329. doi: 10.1177/0959354399093003.
- CASSIDY, A. (2012). Vermin, Victims and Disease: UK framings of Badgers In and Beyond the Bovine TB Controversy, *Sociologia Ruralis*, 52 (2), 192-214 DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9523.2012.00562.x.
- CIXOUS, H. (1977/1991). "Coming to Writing," in D. Jenson (ed.) *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (trans. Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle and Susan Sellers). (pp 1-182). Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London.
- Culling badgers could increase the problem of TB in cattle. (14<sup>th</sup> October, 2012). *The Observer*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2012/oct/14/letters-observer>.
- FREUD, S., Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality. Trans. J. Strachey), pp, 125-245, in *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud (Vol. VII)*. Hogarth and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, London 1905.
- FREUD, S., Fetishism (J. Strachey, Trans), pp.147-157, in *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud (Vol. XXI)*. Hogarth and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, London 1927.
- GLENDINNING, C., 'Technology, Trauma and the Wild', pp. 41-54, in Roszak, T., Gomes, M.E. and Kanner, A.D. (eds) *Ecopsychology: Restoring the earth, healing the mind*. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco 1995
- HARVEY, D. (2003). The Fetish of Technology: Causes and Consequences, *Macalaster International*, Vol. 13, p.3-30. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol13/iss1/7>
- HOWARD-JONES, P.A. (2014). Evolutionary Perspectives on Mind, Brain, and Education. *Mind, Brain and Education*, 8(1), pp21-33. DOI: 10.1111/mbe.12041.
- KLEIN, M., *Envy and Gratitude*. Tavistock Publications, London 1957.
- LOVEGROVE, R., *Silent Fields: The long decline of a nation's wildlife*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008.
- MARX, K. (1867). The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof, in *Capital, Volume One, Commodities and Money*. Retrieved from <http://web.stanford.edu/~davies/Symbsys100-Spring0708/Marx-Commodity-Fetishism.pdf>.
- STERN, D., *The Interpersonal World Of The Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology*. Basic Books, New York, NY 2000.