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# On Objects, Love, and Objectifications: Children in a Material World

Layla AbdelRahim

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force of children's institutions. I am presently working on the final part of the trilogy where I examine options to rewrite the script with life.

the power to make their own choice as to what, when, and where to consume and to decide what is good for them.

Finally, of course it is never mentioned that instead of paying the salaries of the administrators of such projects or administrators in general, it would have been more sincere to value each person's effort equally: a parent's effort to be as valuable as a "professional teacher's" or a garbage collector's pay should be no less than a tax collector's, actually the tax collector already receives his bonus in the fact that his garbage does not stink; or consider the question of why is the effort behind the pesos or the rouble less valuable than the one behind the dollar or the euro. If this is too utopic for some, another option could be to simply donate enough money to the poor so that they, themselves, could provide nourishment for their kids — emotional included. Instead, the system makes the poor, too, depend on consuming what it deems fit for them to consume managing them within the purposefully circumscribed space of tragedy and despair. Finally, the poor and the wealthy, together, abandon their children in the despotical wilderness of the Institution for some to become predators and others obedient prey.

In this light, Karen and Arnold's reaction to Todd's abandonment by the school does not come as a surprise. Long before the school abandoned Todd, they, themselves, had abandoned him in the race for material and symbolic wealth.

To return to the beginning, Korchak's example shows a different approach to love than what is common in consumer society. He does not objectify the "object" of his love nor does he replace it with objects or contradictory meanings. The semantic meaning of his words remains consistent with his actions. He said that he would not abandon these children and he stayed with them even in vanishing — a presence in that which is no longer physically seen or known. He is actively present, even in death and thus fulfills his promise of love.

In this war, is death the only way to love? My next paper on Modernism and Education focuses on how death is the underlying

This work first appeared as a 15-page paper for a doctoral seminar in education at McGill University, Montreal in October 2002. Claudia Mitchell, our professor, challenged us to reflect on the phenomenology of children's space. My paper for that course focused on my child's room. I have since incorporated contrastive and reflective elements from my anthropological observations on childhood and edited the form and the content of the first version to present at the *CHILDHOODS 2005* conference in July in Oslo.

Before proceeding further, I would like to clarify what may come off as a categorical condemnation of ALL of society or of ALL of 'civilised' 'Western' society. When I apply these terms and categories, I refer to the official and the generally valued aspects of social organisation. It is precisely because I understand that all societies are much more variegated than the official or 'mainstream' grammar portrays the various 'nations' to be that I criticise the attempt to standardise human experience according to the "official party-line" turning this experience into suffering.

## Prologue: on Love

How to love a child, asked Janush Korchak, the Polish pediatrician and pedagogue at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which perhaps meant how to be Human. Yet, most people find it difficult to conceive what it is to be able to listen to a child, to respect a child, and to be there for a child even when not one's own, even when one feels it is beyond one's power. The love in your heart will give you the strength, was Korchak's message. Day or night, he waited by the bedside of a dying child so that when the child's eyes opened they would meet the doctor's and the child would know that s/he was not alone in this world and then death would seem less cold, less frightful, less solitary. During World War II, the Germans condemned to death the group of some 200 Orphans in his charge. The doctor had a chance to stay behind. He said that he would not abandon his children at this difficult moment of their lives. He went with them. They all vanished one foggy dawn.

(From the biographical note to the Russian edition of *How to Love a Child*)

Despite the widespread illusion of human "progress", the pertinence of this question has not diminished: What does it mean to love? And, more specifically, how can we be sure that we do love our children?

## Finale: on love, objects, and objections

No essay can avoid touching on politics, particularly one that discusses desires, objects and love. In a world where even the size of one's foot becomes an economic, and therefore political, issue — the amount of foot paraphernalia that can be made, advertised and sold is astounding (Nike vs Adidas vs self-made boots) — love is the easiest merchandise and, concurrently, an excellent political and economic tool in a global hierarchy, a pyramid of those who sell, buy, and control with the millions at the bottom who carry the pyramid on their backs and who still buy and consume what the industrialist/capitalist provides, ironically with their own labour and sacrifices.

In this way, the setting of a room with all its objects is part of the relationship that a person forms with her world and the question of trust, respect and love veils the discrepancies in the meaning and application of these notions.

Even the so-called charity or aid programmes perpetuate dependence: in the summer of 2005 in Montreal, a charity organisation was raising money to serve better meals at schools in "disadvantaged neighbourhoods". While of course "disadvantaged" children need more and better food, such endeavours not only refuse to question the idea of schooling and family separation or even alienation, they present it as positive, as kind, as charity. They also slam shut any possible window to question the fact that the "disadvantaged" (a passive term), both parents and their children, are denied

some few people even wealthier and most others tragically devoid of any possibility for love in any sense. For, when one is constantly hungry and bugged for time, what love can such a person give?

Tragically, though, most social scientists, educators, media, politicians and others continue to use terms that foster negative impressions of people and societies where things are scarce. They call them “poor”, “primitive”, “developing”... and in naming them as such sustain the value and cultivate the desire for the possession of things. In addition to deprivation, poverty has been invented as the stress and pressure to possess. It is this stress and pressure that makes industrialism and capitalism flourish since once you rob people of their time and the possibility for independence, you get workers and consumers.

Therefore, an attempt to answer the question of what makes people want and acquire things inevitably leads to the question of self, relationships, and love; but all these in a different light from the simplistic formula: I want therefore I love or vice versa. The trade-off involved — in the bargain of wanting and ceding and in the schizophrenic use of terminology — reveals our reliance on linguistic and social structures that control us and prescribe particular actions and desires. In simple words, love, objects and objectifications point to fundamental ways of existence that are mouldable and reshapable.

## on Things: questions of Cost

I often hear parents use the term “love” to justify their absence from their children’s lives replacing themselves with bought objects: ‘I love you, look what I got you’. Or: “stop being ungrateful, dad and I work so hard because we love you; we’ve got to work in order to earn money for your own good”, the logic being:

1. work is what brings money. Parents’ care for their children is not paid and therefore is not work. A stranger who cares for a child is paid and therefore is considered to work, even though child-care in general is a minimum wage profession — when lucky.
2. we work so hard in order to earn money with which we can buy you things and other parent-substitutes, such as formula, pacifiers, toys, baby-sitters, educators, friends, books, toys, clothes, more toys, ad infinitum.

Even if not always blatant, repercussions of this reasoning can often be felt in, both, the adults’ view of children as an unprofitable burden and in children’s view of themselves as disparate, void entities and by extension of human relations as severed, calculating and cold. At the basis of these relations lies the desire to accumulate.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu included in the term “possessions” the non-material or social and symbolic capital, such as education, taste, knowledge, etc. Material and non-material possessions acquire their value through social understanding and negotiation. Value is not an inherent aspect of objects, effort or time. It

is the result of a complex process that involves mythology, education, and the mobilisation of the whole cultural apparatus in order to impose the idea, which in the capitalist/globalist world means that some individuals and groups earn disgracefully more for their time and effort while others incomparably less or that some things cost less while others peculiarly more.

For example, one could make a t-shirt from scrap, recycled fabric and it would cost one hour worth of effort. If the maker belongs to an upper class with social and economic weight and labels himself or herself as an “*haute couture*” and not “low couture” designer, s/he could exchange this scrap t-shirt for thousands of dollars. How does this work?

Bourdieu explains that by belonging to a certain group with social and economic power a person has access to the group’s social and symbolic wealth which allows the person to evaluate his or her effort according to the position that s/he occupies in the group’s scale. In this way, a person sells not only the t-shirt but also the label that marks the buyer as a member of that (powerful in this specific example) group. Taste and the act of buying become tickets to specific cliques and, as such, labels differentiate their owner from owners of other labels. Needless to say, that currency ratings undergo similar “operations” in order to blow-up the rate of some and deflate to the point of total misery, even extinction, the currency of others.

Of course this works because people believe in this system or resign to it because they either view it as natural or as inevitable. If people didn’t participate in it, needless to say, it wouldn’t be there. But since most people strive to acquire material and symbolic wealth, they succumb to spending more on overpriced labels, currencies, objects, services, etc. But, as Bourdieu demonstrates, they forget that the stakes in a pyramidal order are predetermined so that the majority will stay at the bottom of the scale regardless of how much they work, purchase or spend. There simply is no space for everyone up there. But the myths are important to give people

afternoons in love and gratitude with their Jeeps, may not understand. However, are the relationships, rationale, methods, consequences, or feelings the same, in spite of their similar contribution to car industry and global capitalism? For, Jill beautifies her car after three days of adventure and life in the wilderness (regardless of its effects on the forests she tramps, on the labour markets of the “Developing” (slaving) World that makes the Jeep a possibility for her, or on the oil fields of the middle East), while Jack rubs his in order to keep out the rust, to touch and dust his beloved with tenderness, this Jeep that adorns his self and which by its mere existence provides his life with meaning? What is this meaning?

It is interesting to note that the phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches have taken root in Occidental thought at a time when industrialisation has made things overabundant and people over-dependent (on things as well, and as bad).

Phenomenology could thus be a tricky method unless the investigator uses it most cautiously in order to reveal the dislexic, schizophrenic<sup>1</sup>, contradictory and redundant nature, feelings and relationships between people, meaning and objects. An attempt to elucidate how and why would a person acquire or use a particular object can point to the semantics of living with objects, people and the environment all the while the mischievous objects themselves remain slyly deaf, dumb, and numb.

My concern is to take the study of objects beyond its current scope and the status quo of the illusory progress of humanity and of material evolution of things, in order to find other possible ways of living with people and things, possibly with less things and preferably with self-made; because, when we spend time and effort making our own, we make only what is necessary, mostly of recycled matter and do not need to exploit the natural and human resources of the planet in order to buy things we don’t need thus making

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<sup>1</sup> The term “schizophrenia” comes from Greek meaning “split mind” referring to the condition when a person is “split from reality”.



the hope and the illusion that if they worked hard, studied more, bought and consumed, each one of them could end up there.

## **Conclusion: On the Study of Things: Phenomenology, et al**

Consumerism and desires are excellent tools of control over some (many) people and of profit for others (fewer) people. In this way, everything – from the setting of a room to what we eat and do – is part of a person’s relationship with the world. Desire for objects exercises a power over the individual who has to conduct specific services and tasks in order to be able to obtain the money to buy the objects of desire (in this logic, people also acquire the status of objects). The invention of money made it possible for some people to control the lives, effort, work and desires of others and to dictate to them what to purchase and where and how to spend time. Hence, on the one hand, things – when used moderately and wisely – can be assets in enhancing independence and freeing time, yet at the same time, they can be a dangerous enemy to creativity and independence. Objects and habitat can thus be slippery “texts” – for, interpretation obeys the common and uncommon senses of the beholder.

It is like two neighbours with two identical Jeeps: Jill has the car in order to camp in what’s left of the forest, while Jack keeps it in order to improve his social status. He gives up many occasions for travel so as not to increase mileage and even sustains himself in order to service and maintain the vehicle. Both Jack and Jill may be seen every Sunday afternoon scrupulously washing and oiling their respective Jeeps in their respective backyards. Behind the exchanged greetings each might even harbour a warm feeling of sharing something together that others, who do not spend their Sunday

## on Things: question of Love, Hatred, and Shame

The culture of childhood, parenthood, or that of child-rearing and education is vital for the endurance of a system, particularly for those who profit from it. What puzzles though is when people who have more to sacrifice than to reap from this system of exchange abandon their children to it and to the professionals trained to safeguard someone else's interests. Parents justify this act by saying that "we are absent all day from your lives in order to buy you things, care, company, and love".

Love, in this sense, comprises everything from the hard-core matter to the effervescent idealism that includes taste, types of knowledge, and social networks. They thus transmit matter and love (i.e. desire to possess) for matter.

Love in the other sense, where a person gives something of the self to another, has no place in the culture of baby-sitters, day-care, school, after-school extensions, etc. In fact, the majority of parents secretly (even from themselves) hate themselves and despise their own knowledge or parental skills and feel that they are either incompetent or have nothing to transmit because "only professionals can teach my child" anything of worth; and hence they send their children to the professionals who transmit to those children professional, paid "love" during the 8 am – 6 pm shifts and based on the Ministry of Education curriculum – a programme set not with love and out of love, but from the perspective of how to most efficiently organise labour and consumption patterns. Education offers tools, not love and since the majority has to stay at the bottom

what the "medical" symptoms might be telling about the context of family relations. Instead of listening to the scream of despair, parents side with the "professional" – the Institution – and read the disorder symptoms as medical conditions to be remedied by "professionals" and according to "professional" norms and requirements that aim at manufacturing a docile child manageable for the troupe of overseers of social order and capitalist interests.

Karen and Arnold's trust choice is stimulated economically: they want/need to earn money and do not want/need to keep their children at home like some home-schoolers do, who are either rich and can "afford it" or are really "poor" because of the sacrifices society imposes on those who choose to raise their own kids. Karen and Arnold also want to accrue the symbolic capital that comes along with a child's being part of a prestigious institution.

However there is more to their story. Trust in authority comes, not only as a rational choice, but as an irrational reflex undermining the basic parental instinct that normally would push a parent to protect offspring – including from strangers, who the nursery and kindergarten employees really are. And here we touch on a general trend of contemporary "civilised" society, which, paradoxically, through individual greed dumbs down to totalitarian obedience.

Finally, when we give our trust to a children's institution, we inevitably strip it away from the child, which points to an inherent dichotomy between the interests of a child and those of the Institution in charge of children.

“Actually, they didn’t know that we were here, so they didn’t leave him with us. Plus, how do you know at what point their realisation came? They could have realised this when they were getting the kids ready to be picked up by the parents. And, do you think that between me and them, I have more reasons to lie about what happened?”

“I don’t know why you insist on slandering them. All I know is that Laurel said that as soon as they had reached the kindergarten, she realised Todd was missing and ran back immediately and it couldn’t have been more than 5 or 10 minutes...”

Todd’s suffering (for whatever number of minutes) and the danger to which he had been exposed did not seem to shake his parents’ faith in their prestigious institution.

One of the difficulties in anthropology is also its strong asset, namely, the degree to which we can take a specific example, even if it may seem anomalous, and generalise it to the extent of claiming to understand society better. In the example above, we can say that, “well, statistically it is not frequent that kindergartens forget kids behind; this is an exception and hopefully it will teach Laurel and her colleagues to be more vigilant in the future”. What the above incident exposes, though, is the general aspect of human/institutional relations, which means that even when the abstract and the general become concrete and personal, the institution has been incorporated in the self to the point that an individual would think and live through it and on behalf of it at the expense of personal instincts. Even if personal reactions to the incident may vary: some people would scream at Laurel, others might sue or pull out their kids only to place them in the same institution elsewhere – the child is still surrendered.

The question of trust is multifaceted. Some of its aspects are revealed in situations of conflict between the child and educator, where parents mostly side with the Institution: they trust doctors, teachers, psychiatrists with questions ranging from toilet training to Prozac, rarely pausing to ask the child’s opinion or to listen to

to carry the pyramid on their shoulders, the standardised syllabus is the most efficient way to achieve subordination, as long as parents don’t meddle in.

Love, effort, gender issues, have all become useful concerns in contemporary sociology – a normative science, like psychology. Some feminists have even attempted to calculate the value of love in order to create an equation of male and female unaccounted for contribution or effort at home and in society – not a bad idea in itself when seen from this logic of experience but highly problematic because it perpetuates that same logic where parenthood is understood as an investment that begins with the provision of social and material capital before and at the expense of other aspects of children’s and family’s well-being, leading to a crisis of childhood, parenthood and family.

This crisis is the result of the pricing system discussed above, since the time and effort spent by a parent on a child is not valued and childcare is a low pay occupation. For example, how are we going to evaluate the process of conception? Who spent how much time and who gained what? Then, how about the time, sleep, and litres of blood “spent” on a pregnancy and then on breast-feeding (mother’s milk is made from the woman’s blood and needs good nutrition, outdoors light, sleep and time)? Then how are we going to price the time spent on bonding? On caring? Or on the zillion other intricacies of human relationships?

My point is that motherhood is priceless. But it can not be without material or emotional support from others, particularly from the more powerful. For example, every politician in North America could easily support fully AT LEAST 5 families in the third world and MORE than one single mothers in his own country. Since society is set up to have these people (mostly men) rule, society can begin with them its reorganisation towards a more just world.

We can continue restructuring other “social” fields as well: for example, I propose that if a graduate student, particularly with a family, gets funding refused for his or her research, those profes-

sors who have been approached for letters of recommendation split the costs of the family among themselves (I bet the 'letter of recommendation' system would be immediately abolished). And don't even let me start on businesses; only when these people begin to divide fairly what they make off the fruit of other people's labour can we begin to refer to human conglomeration as "society". The term 'society', together with the accompanying notion of 'service to society', appears as a set-up set up in order to trick people and weaken them. In fact, the term is more appropriate to wolves and felines who do more for each other's children than we do.

And so, childcare can never have a price-tag because there is too much at stake. But what happens is that the majority of people, in general, and in the sphere of childcare, in particular, work hard and dirty yet fare poorly.

The low status of parenthood, just like other "dirty" jobs, in market economy is a curious phenomenon. On the one hand, the capitalist system needs producers to generate clean streets, technological or industrial gadgets, and future generations of workers and soldiers. Yet, these "producers" are despised.

Marilyn Bronstein who ran a women's co-op for mothers with young children in Montreal found out that she could not mention the word "mother" in applications for grants: "You have to say "women". Wait a minute, but aren't women mothers? Apparently not. The second No-no is any mention of childcare. My project focused on creating community viable outlets. Childcare is time and energy consuming. It is a serious issue, if you want the best for the family. Apparently, that is not viewed as a socially viable solution that deserved serious (i.e. publicly funded) consideration".

Another grant, Marilyn explained, intended to help women get into non-traditional jobs. "I told that to my agent and he said 'so you're going to stir up all these women and then there won't be any jobs waiting for me', so I changed the grant to teaching women self-esteem when they're not in the workforce. And I got the grant. Grant priorities change from year to year like fashion".

he was screaming for at least 20 minutes and she could not make sense of what he said. When Todd realised that Liouba and I were there, he cheered up and just as he began to play, a panic stricken day-care teacher appeared, looking for a forgotten child.

"Did he stay behind with you?" she asked me.

"No, we didn't even know he was out with this group" I replied and was curious to hear the version that would be presented to Todd's parents.

Soon after the incident, we see Karen, Arnold and the kids. "So, you kept Todd behind at the playground," was their greeting. The kindergarten didn't even bother to make up a story that would not contradict my testimony. I should, also, mention that this neighbourhood and the kindergarten were considered among the prestigious parts of Montreal and of day-care establishments.

I got the impression that the parents were annoyed that I witnessed a serious bluff by the prestigious institution to which they belonged. I explained to them that we didn't even know that Todd was with the group, that we found him at least half an hour after the kindergarten was gone and that, in fact, he was found by a stranger. However, Karen interrupted me briskly pressing with the Kindergarten's version.

It is interesting that Karen and Arnold made the decision in favour of the Institution. Not only that, they made it as if they were that Institution. As parents, they did not want to get in conflict with the kindergarten but as part of that institution, they wanted to convince me, a witness to the institution's blunder, of its competence.

"Well, errors happen," insisted Karen, "so they forgot him for a few minutes..."

"More than 30," I interjected.

"No, it wasn't 30 minutes, it was 2 minutes. I know. They told me they went back immediately when they realised they had left him with you," persisted Karen.

## On Issues that objectify: Trust in Institution

The complexity of the notion of trust extends to everything that touches a person's life. What, who, why, how, when can we trust concerns not only the quality of life that we expect but, on a primordial level, our survival. Trust/mistrust is part of a complex process of the way we react to strangers and others almost on the level of our basic instinct. But what is this instinct in today's "civilised" context? Let us turn to a concrete example of how parents can "choose" whom to trust and whom to mistrust.

On a Tuesday in July 2004, Liouba (5) and I had an appointment with her friends at a playground at 4pm. To profit from a lovely day outdoors, we arrived an hour earlier. "Liouba, Liuoba," we heard someone shout from the slides and saw her friend, Celine (5 years old) waving. Celine was out with her kindergarten group. Liouba joined them, but in 10 minutes the teachers rounded up the day-care kids and went back to school.

"Don't worry, Liouba," I comforted her. "In less than an hour you'll see Celine". We left the playground to wash our hands and eat our lunch returning at least 30 minutes after the kindergarten was gone. I took out my knitting while Liuoba went to play in the sand when suddenly a woman approaches us with a screaming boy.

"Whose child is this?"

His face was so distorted with distress that I failed to recognise him at first. Then I saw that it was Todd, Celine's 3-year-old brother. "How did you end up here", I asked. "Bwwwwwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa" was the heartbreaking reply. The woman who had found him said

This attitude towards parenthood in general, but motherhood specifically, is both a reflection of and the force behind the dismissal of childcare as a low priority private and social responsibility. Instead, it shifts the focus on symbolic values and on materialism that other occupations may foster.

However, there seems to be few winners in this system of things. For, if the poor workers bestow little time, social capital, or precious matter upon their progeny, those who fare better financially compensate with acquisitions the time they lose at work and in social networking at clubs, bars, parties, or in other forms of entertainment. In this logic, things become directly proportionate to "love" and raise many questions, such as what type of people and the degree of their health can such a culture nurture. By health I mean functioning in harmony with the social and natural environment.

The topic of poverty is key here, but unfortunately, I have limited space and time to give it its due. In this work, I concentrate on material culture as a context for relationships because access to material goods is an important part of how people view themselves and their relationships with others. Here are two examples to illustrate this self-perception.

"I grew up extremely poor," I heard on several occasions in Canada and the U.S. Such proclamation startled me. What is it like to characterise oneself as poor? Myself, I grew up in a household with financial strains — at times dire — but I never perceived myself or my family as "poor". Rather the opposite. Growing up, I felt happy. I asked what it meant to grow up poor in North America. My poor interlocutors replied that they couldn't buy new clothes.

"It was horrible. I hated going to school, 'cause others had fancy new clothes while mine always came from the thrift shop. And then for X-mass, everyone had those big X-mass trees with lots of new decorations and boxes and boxes of gifts, but we always had this same old plastic one with the same old stuff and little second-hand-

shop gifts. I hated my mother. I hated my home. I was always so ashamed of them. Brrr... I couldn't wait to grow up and get away from them [parents]..." explained Lynne, a graduate of Smith College who grew up in California.

Suzan, a writer, from Ontario also focused on clothes.

I grew up extremely poor. I never had new clothes. They were always hand-downs. My mother decided to have the three of us knowing she'd be a single mom since my father never intended to marry her. But she couldn't handle the responsibility. So when we got the welfare cheque, we felt like millionaires. That's how poor we've been... I always attended private schools, 'cause I had scholarships. All those other kids had rich parents and nice things and I was always wearing hand-down pants. Sometimes 5<sup>th</sup> generation. I hated it.

Both of these examples are characteristic of the majority of the comments I heard on growing up poor in the context of "developed" countries. Much of the perception of poverty is related to wanting new things, more things, better things, like-other-people's things, better-than-other-people's things. In other words, the pressure to fit into an outside material standard shifts the dimensions of inside relations and togetherness to splintered childhoods, shattered by objects, the lack of them, and the desire to possess.

Suzan's comment is the more interesting, because it reveals the extent of privation to which her family was subjected apart from having had to wear hand-down clothes. For, if they lived on less than welfare for several years, it means that they had no provision even in terms of basic necessities and in Western countries — where access to nature and public space costs money — it means that they were also deprived of space along with time.

For example, public transportation is expensive and is not comprehensive in what it can reach. Without a car, one feels handi-

promise of material bliss in the "future" is part of the same strategy that markets obedience, consumerism, misery and mistrust, a strategy that shuffles meanings, sells 500ml juice in 750ml bottles, substitutes bright packages of favourite monsters on TV with yogurt derived from miserable cows and chemical laboratories, and so on, ad infinitum. In all of this, parents, instead of siding with their children and protecting them, end up being the prime vehicles of capitalist meaning.

intonation?). People call such behaviour “protective”, “caring”, “loving”. Since this is love, many children learn to suppress their frustration and to accept others’ control and their own failure. Later, they reproduce this love, care and protection with younger ones, but also with their own parents by then grown old, child-like and frail and thus continue the cycle.

The Nikitins call for trusting the child, providing her with an emotionally safe and enriching environment rather than limitations and control. Such attitude would raise the curiosity, creativity and confidence levels to the extent that parents would not need consumerism to replace family relations, because an independent child will know how to make toys, invent games or find answers to questions about the self and the world. There is an important distinction to make, though, between trust and neglect or between self-chosen independence or self-reliance and imposed neglect concealed by slaving parent substitutes, vocabulary, and things.

But how could meaning of a child’s freedom to investigate experience and choose her own categories appear in a capitalist setting? For example, Françoise Dolto advises parents to pay children for household chores in order to help them become financially autonomous and concomitantly conscientious workers. Or, at the Childhoods 2005 conference in Oslo, numerous presentations focused on the “positive” aspects of consumerism and called for the participation of children in this sphere – they equated participation in consumerism with “empowerment” and “independence”.

But the problem is that a child who receives a few dollars for washing dishes does not learn independence, rather the contrary: to succumb to the will of others, to do them services in return for a reward set by the more powerful. In this case, the child does not do the dishes because s/he uses them or to participate on an equal footing in family life. The child does them for a materialistic end in order to get something from materialistic parents. It goes without saying that having children do schoolwork for grades and for the

capped in North America. Many bicycle paths leading to the countryside in Quebec, for example *le petit chemin du nord*, cost money. To have a workshop, a studio or a spot for writing is extra \$2. Needless to say that each meal counts towards the energy and time needed to perform a task. No meal – no energy. Time ticks between the meals and the longer the gap – the less there is of performance. This applies to everything, to meals and to bills, if the shoes are too tight, too leaky, too uncomfortable, one can’t get far in cold weather; one gets stressed. If there is no coat, if there is no heating (and we know that heating companies cut it off if a family doesn’t pay); one gets stressed. Hungry and crowded people with no exit, whether they are children or adults, scream and burst out with aggression sometimes against the violence of institutionalised injustice but more often amongst themselves and against those weaker than themselves.

Suzan’s case is not an exception, rather the contrary. For example, here is what the *Encyclopedia of Social Welfare History in North America* (pp 280–283) says about Canada, who boasts more national wealth and higher commitment to social justice than some other countries:

“Younger single people, aboriginal people, persons with disabilities, women, and children are more likely to be poor than other Canadians. ... (U)nattached seniors, particularly women, have very high poverty rates... The poverty rate for young single people increased from 39% in 1981 to 61% in 1997. The poverty rate for persons with disabilities was 31% in 1995... Single women under age 65 have higher poverty rates than men, 41% compared to 35%. Female single parents had the highest poverty rate of all family types at 56% in 1997. Child poverty remains a particular concern to Canadians because children are unambiguously not to blame for their situation.

Also, raising children in poverty hampers their career opportunities”. Children’s poverty rate, regardless of background, rose to 1.4 million or 20% of the total population by year 2000 (data taken from an article by Richard Shillington, *ibid*).

The formulation of the above paragraph implies that, since children are not to blame for their poverty, adults are to be held accountable for their misfortunes. Yet, the authors concede that growing up poor hampers the opportunities when these children become adults. So, my question is, are we to blame them when they grow up or do we concede that all adults have once been children who either grew up in want or were coerced into it?

Now, if Canadian statistics on poverty are outrageous, the United States boasts the highest poverty rate among industrialised states.

Prison statistics are further revealing of the distribution of power and social relations in North America and their effect on childhood and parenthood. For example, according to Vicky Pelaez<sup>1</sup>, there “are approximately 2 million inmates in state, federal and private prisons throughout the [U.S.]. According to California Prison Focus, “no other society in human history has imprisoned so many of its own citizens.” The figures show that the United States has locked up more people than any other country: a half million more than China, which has a population five times greater than the U.S. Statistics reveal that the United States holds 25% of the world’s prison population, but only 5% of the world’s people”.

Since prisoners constitute an important niche for cheap labour, the solution sought in North America, is to make prisons private, where prisoners would work directly for big businesses<sup>2</sup> who now

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<sup>1</sup> Pelaez, Vicky. *The prison industry in the United States: Big business or a new form of slavery*. 13 October 2005. See [www.doublestandards.org](http://www.doublestandards.org)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*.

## On Things: Questions of Mistrust

Since the 1950s of Soviet Russia, Lena Alexeevna Nikitina and Boris Pavlovich Nikitin, have been sounding alarm that children’s most vicious enemy is, in fact, adults’ mistrust that begins with holding the child when she walks, helping her up when she falls, forbidding her to climb “dangerous” stairs even on the primitive children’s playgrounds marked “for use between 0–3 years old”, picking up the child and sticking her on the slide, constantly telling her what to do or not, what to wear, eat, feel, know, think, and so on, in other words, exercising total control. Mistrust is also manifested in speaking for the child, putting words in her mouth, branding, evaluating, “helping” and “teaching”. Finally, it takes the form of siding with the institution in the adult endeavor to reconstruct the child from a curious individual to an obedient consumer of things and of instruction<sup>1</sup>.

Protective behaviour on the part of adults may, at first glance, seem harmless, even benign. In the long run, it affects the physical, emotional, and mental development, where the child forfeits her right to learn to trust her own abilities and limitations. The absence of those inner mechanisms of self-regulation creates outright danger and is at the basis of much stress and “failure” of the future-adult. Moreover, mistrust sends children the following message: adults treat anyone smaller and weaker than themselves as frail, handicapped, even insipid (have you heard that baby-talk-

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<sup>1</sup> Interesting that in Latin languages the term ‘instruction’ has two components: education and directives.



artificial substitute for the massive possibilities offered by forests, riverbank slopes, climbing country-house roofs, and so forth of which we are denied in city existence, particularly in Western setting, where the underdeveloped public transportation infrastructure<sup>1</sup>, hefty fees, private property laws, the destruction of natural resources, etc. render space and nature inaccessible. However, our approach to the object, to the meanings attached to our approach of this object and to the limitations or the liberties that we ascribe to our child point to who we are.

Our trust does not end here, however. We took Nikitins' advice and extended it to Liouba's decision making with regard to other aspects of her life, such as toilet training (at 4 months of age), nursing (till 3 ½ years with a break and finally till 4 years and 2 months), and her decision to take off to Russia without her mom.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the *petit train du nord* used to be a railway service that connected the north of Quebec with Montreal. Car industry destroyed the railway and installed TWO highways. The railway was recently turned into a paid bicycle path.

find Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans too hungry and too dying to work yet too costly.

According to Statistics Canada, Canadians don't fare much better. Whole groups can find themselves ousted from the arena of national wealth. The example of the aboriginal nations shows that aboriginals comprise 3% of total populace. Yet, most of them are either in poverty or in jail.

- In Saskatchewan, Aboriginal adults are incarcerated at 35 times the rate of non-aboriginals, where they make up 77% of the total prisoner population (10% of outside population)
- In the Yukon – Aboriginal adults make up 74% of the total prisoner population (20% of outside population)
- In Manitoba – Aboriginal adults make up 70% of the total prisoner population (11% of outside population)
- In Alberta – Aboriginal adults make up 38% of the total prisoner population (4% of outside population)
- In Ontario – Aboriginal adults make up 9% of the total prisoner population (1% of outside population)
- In British Columbia – Aboriginal adults make up 20% of the total prisoner population (10% of outside population)

#### Aboriginal Women (2004–2005):

- Aboriginal women make up 30% of the female prisoner population

- In Saskatchewan, Aboriginal women account for 87% of all female admissions
- In Manitoba and the Yukon, Aboriginal women account for 83% of all female admissions
- In Alberta, Aboriginal women account for 54% of all female admissions
- In British Columbia, Aboriginal women account for 29% of all female admissions<sup>3</sup>

The main question that begs itself here, is who and what factors are responsible for all these people being in poverty or jail. However, we are concerned with the effect of these social relations on childhood and parenthood. If we consider that, in rich countries alone, over the utterly miserable multitudes hovers a hefty miserable middle class stressing over making ends meet, that leaves a very small group of satisfied childhoods who are out of poverty or out of jail. The most important revelation of the statistics, though, is the brutality and injustice towards motherhood, womanhood, ethnic minorities and childhood and youth.

To return to personal interpretations, what struck me in Suzan's and other reflections, is that their perception of poverty concentrated on the lack of new clothes. They never expressed to me compassion or love towards their struggling parents and siblings, only hatred and shame — understandable emotions towards the violence inherent to the injustice of social relations fostered by seclusion, alienation deprivation and stress.

Suzan also judged her mother as irresponsible, because it is widely assumed in this globalising culture that parenthood is to be deserved and earned according to the scale of income. The moral and the material thus, once again, intertwine and the alienation of victims from their own interests is appalling.

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.prisonjustice.ca](http://www.prisonjustice.ca)

## on Using Things: questions of Trust and Respect

Apart from the example of the house, we decided to also give Liouba the trust and an opportunity to decide in other spheres of her experience, such as to train herself to be wise, confident, strong and independent, sometimes testing our own principles. The Skripalev sports-complex that we installed in her room illustrates this relationship.

Pictures 2 and 3 portray the sports-complex we brought with us from Russia. It has rings, a rope ladder, a wooden ladder, a fixed ladder, a swinging ladder, a rope, an elastic liana, a swinging gymnast's bar, a fixed bar and the slide which leads to her bunk bed. Liouba had this sports complex since she was 4 months old, and the only rule regarding its use has been the same that the Nikitins used in their home: namely, that no adult interferes with suggestions or help to reach something that she can not do by herself. This way she can only do what she is ready to do. By the age of three, she could climb anywhere and could reach any spot in the room without touching the floor. When Liouba's friends come, we do not allow the parents to come in and "help" their children. Even though many children are weak and unable to support their own body weight with their arms and swing, they learn quickly how and where to climb and when it is time to leave, most parents have difficulty retrieving them from under the ceiling.

This example points to the relationship between parents and child. It is not the sports complex by itself that "evolves" Liouba into a more mature and confident child. The complex is only an

who purchase them, this house saved matter that would have gone to waste and brought us together. Creativity can be simultaneously aesthetic and practical.

The house has become Liuba's hiding place, her possibility for seclusion. While she uses the whole apartment as hers, she also knows that she shares it with others. In fact, she relies on the knowledge that she can always find someone somewhere, be it in the kitchen, the living room, the office, or the bathroom; even her room — someone might always knock or she, herself, may call one of us in. However, her little, dancing with sunny colours house is outside our reach. She trusts our respect for her privacy. At the basis of this respect live our love and our trust — mutual and her decision for independence.

"I'm against prolonged maternity leave," said Agnes, a chemist from Montreal. "Each time I had a kid, I went back to the laboratory when they were 3 months old. If you don't have enough money to pay for your staying at home, then you have to work. If you can't work, then don't have kids. It's as simple as that". Agnes had 2 children and said that she couldn't afford any more".

These examples indicate that in North America, even in Canada where parents can resort to a more extended parental leave and welfare, the notion of having children is tightly connected to income. Income, children and the standard of living are conceptualised as natural categories that are the result of a person's worth and a reflection of what the person deserves: if one has much money, one deserves it. If one is in financial strain, one merited it too. Love and compassion are read in the context and from a life-stance of capitalism and consumerism.

Moreover, these examples reveal that the pressure to possess — not make — things is a major force underlying the feeling of deprivation and poverty. It is a reflection of impotence and sterility since people can not generate what they need and yet are coerced to provide things ignoring the context of pain and exploitation that is inherent to capitalist production and market economy. It is important to remember though, that when parents choose to replace themselves with toys, books, live-in-care, nannies, genetically modified food, etc. they replace themselves with objects imbued with immense suffering.

"Successful" capitalism is based on the exploitation for profit of, not only time and space, but of living organisms in all their forms: food, services, labour. A nanny living with and caring for a wealthy child in North America or Europe abandons behind 5 children in the Philippines so she could send her hungry in all the senses children the miserable pennies bestowed on her by the wealthy Northerners. The genetically modified grains, fruits and vegetables carry sterile seeds that are incapable of the basic instinct of life: self-reproduction. The sterilisation of pets, the poisonous

pesticides and fungicides, the dying from exhaustion and malnutrition third-worlders, the stressed-to-the-point-of-madness first- and second-worlders, the animals tortured in farms and in medical and scientific laboratories, and so much more — all engender objects of hatred, suffering and death. This context is an essential part of the relationship between objects and people.

Children abandoned to these objects inhale this hatred and suffering. Abandoned to the claws of ministerial curriculum they also learn to perceive themselves as poor. Conceiving themselves as poor, they become impotent, lusting to amass and to consume and when they cannot satisfy this urge, instead of questioning the system that betrayed them, most often, they internalise their place in it and learn to hate themselves and their parents.

Hatred seems to be the central lesson of a curriculum that leads to devout consumerism and hence to a crisis of childhood, parenthood and family.

## on Making Things: questions of Respect

This is an excerpt from my journal marked ‘autumn, 2002’.

Having been inspired among others by Korchack and Nikitins, Sasha and I interpreted “love” in the non-commercial sense and chose, first of all, to be “there” for our daughter Liouba, which meant being less “out there” in the social world. This meant less material means, living space, time and energy.

The decision forced us to rely on meagre supplies and sharpened the imagination and artisan skills not only of the parents, but also Liouba’s. One such example is Liouba’s “town-house”. The second floor whose original construction, in a previous existence, used to be a TV box. Liouba hid inside it when she was 1 year and 10 months old and said, “ku-ku”, shutting and opening the lid. I cut out windows, she decided where she wanted to have the door; we dug out colourful old rags and together patched a joyful mosaic on the outside. She painted the inside with pencils and crayons. The ground floor came later. Liouba and her dad made it from the remains of the wood with which dad made our bed and wardrobe. She decorated it in bright acrylics and I “filled in the gaps”.

The house has a meaning and a purpose. First, it served as an outlet for spontaneous creativity, which we took playfully yet seriously. Second, it is a sign of independence and potency: one can create something almost from nothing, and that makes it different from the children’s houses purchased in stores, because contrary to commercial toys that snatch everything from the lives of the underpaid workers who make them and from the working parents

first 6 months, while anthropologist Katherine Dettwyler, editor of *Breastfeeding: Biocultural Perspectives*, offers a wider span for nursing human babies ranging from a minimum of 2 ½ years to a maximum of 7.

According to her research, societies, in which children are allowed to nurse as long as they want to, children usually self-wean with no arguments or emotional trauma, between three and four years of age (which was exactly what my daughter did). “Another important consideration for the older child is that they are able to maintain their emotional attachment to a person rather than being forced to switch to an inanimate object such as a teddy bear or blanket. I think this sets the stage for a life of people-orientation, rather than materialism, and I think that is a good thing,” says Dettwyler.

To return to my physicians, doctor Janice’s words express perfectly the opinions of the rest of my respondents. “Yes, the UN recommends that [minimum one year]. So, one year is enough. You should wean after that. Such abnormal nursing is bad for the family. The child will grow dependent, and nursing lowers the mother’s sexual drive, which can cause problems in the family later on and will harm the baby”.

Apart from the minimum standard being “good enough” for the child, this attitude touches on several other issues. First, it raises the question of child dependency versus independence discussed above and where cruelty and abandonment are presented as the meaning of love. Second, it expects the child and the mother to adapt their nature to the male sexual standards, rather than vice versa (democracy, i.e. the totalitarianism of numbers, does not apply in this case). Third, this makes sense politically and economically, for, socialised sexuality consumes sexy attire, make-up, specialised foods, diets, food & drink industry in general, contraceptives, cars, furniture, entertainment, ad infinitum.

But is all this really inevitable?

## on Things: the question of categorization and interests

The symptoms of this crisis are manifest in the rise of statistical rates on neurological and mental disorders that indicate children’s alienation from themselves and their environment. For example, anorexia, bulimia and plastic surgeries reveal self-hate; autism, dyslexia and other reading or learning disorders, attention span deficit, hyperactivity, depression (manic, chronic or whatever) schizophrenia, outbursts of violence, just to name a few — all point to the disconnectedness from the self and from the outside world. Yet, we cover up the truth with “intelligent” jargon.

The formulation used in Statistics Canada is an excellent example of how language can conceal cause and effect. The subtitle is already an exercise in linguistics: “*The transition from home to school: a key factor in identifying certain types of disability in children*”; for it remains an open question as to whether, just because there might be some “deviance” in a few children, all children should be subjected to treatment as suspect. Doesn’t the mechanism of questioning often bear the fruit of confession regardless of whether one has committed the crime or not?

Further, the authors say that the proportions of some types of disability, among which they list learning disabilities, increase when children begin to attend school. They propose the following explanation: “The transition from home to school may explain some of this variation. For example, learning disabilities are often not ap-

parent until the child begins to attend school; as well, these difficulties are more easily detected within the school context<sup>1</sup>”.

The authors do not seem to question whether the school “detects” the problem or perhaps causes it. It is even more peculiar that many parents do not think that there may be anything wrong with the fact that their child has been learning well at home yet at school gets diagnosed with a learning disability or that sometimes the child’s behaviour deteriorates and even changes completely the minute s/he is placed in school.

This does not come as a surprise, though, if we consider that society’s logic categorises the expectation itself of a child along with diseases and disorders. A doctor in the United States explained to me the reason behind the signs on university campuses inviting students to the infirmary. The ads group pregnancy together with sexual diseases, the doctor said, because as a “natural”, “biological” category, pregnancy is a parasitic growth with tumor-like behaviour.

The point here is not to argue pro-life or pro-choice in the American political sense. The point is categorisation itself that is not neutral but has the power to impart specific knowledge, logic and values that are part of symbolic capital. In the logic of a culture that emphasises individualism often pushed to the extreme of egotism, indeed, any life that comes to depend on another, be it a child on a parent, a parent on a child, a friend on a friend, an unemployed on “social aid”, etc., is seen as parasitic, as illness. Hence it becomes vital to conceal through language the ultimate dependence of the rich on poverty, desire, and suffering.

In spite of all, children appear. They manage to appear in a world of totalitarian birth control, high-tech medical facilities, and institutionalised schizophrenia. Each is a miracle indeed. Yet, these miracles begin to suffer and to battle for their existence before they are even conceived as an idea. When they are conceived as physical

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.statcan.ca](http://www.statcan.ca)

## on Love: the question of Sex

Western doctors, the overseers of social “health”, urge parents to think about sexual relationships and career before pregnancy, during pregnancy and postpartum.

The highly complex phenomenon of sexual energy — the yearning for fulfillment and creative togetherness is thus reduced to sexual intercourse for the sake of pleasure tantamount to the consumption of sterile, genetically modified food. Sterile sexuality is empty pleasure that has no possibility, not even a chance of creativity. This is not to say that sexual intercourse necessarily has to take place with the intention to reproduce. But when the idea of creation — any kind (artistic or biological) — at any point of a union between two people has been a priori eliminated, the physiological act itself breathes emptiness, death.

At the same time, the need to connect with someone for the expression of such creativity, the pleasure of creation sought in a union, can be misinterpreted as a sexual need, because in its basic sense, the act of creation gives the pleasure of satisfaction. The “market” can cash well on this urge particularly when it is not satisfied but almost. Hence, the capitalist “curriculum” promotes sterile sexuality and the medical capitalist plays an important role in this.

In Montreal, I have spoken to 7 doctors, of whom 3 were male and 4 female and 7 nurses (all female). Most of them were from the CLSC, the centralised governmental health association that establishes clinics in every neighbourhood of the province of Quebec. All were shocked to hear that I nursed my child for about 4 years. I pointed out that even UNICEF stipulates nursing for NOT less than a year, preferably two, with no supplements during the

else, including, or perhaps in the first place, their own parents (and seen the wider picture, of course rightly so). Love as the energy of creation, of transmission of a part of oneself to another, whether as personal creativity or cultural or biological reproduction, has been consistently fading away. It is therefore not surprising that consumerist art such as Andy Warhol's would be chosen to represent contemporary experience: flat, compulsive and sterile.

entities, their scream for love and their whole being are reduced to physical explanations.

North American scientists accentuate the "genetic" or "physiological" interpretations of human mystery such as the murderous gene, the gay chromosome, the serotonin levels, and so forth. These explanations allow parents and all involved to ignore, with a somnified conscience, the symptoms of unhappiness, frustration, atrophy and decay. Instead of changing the system that causes this vacuum and pain, they dive deeper, submerging their families in the ocean of material love and beloved purchases. Medication, doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, criminologists, police, *et al* are all necessary attributes in this system of things, paid for by the parents' sacrifice of their children and love on the scaffold of civilisation. In this regard, archeology, phenomenology and hermeneutics were bound to take root in a culture that valued possessions.

Bourdieu defined Western materialism as a system in the relationship between the possessor and the object of possession in these terms:

"Legitimate manners owe their value to the fact that they manifest the rarest conditions of acquisition, that is, a social power over time which is tacitly recognized as the supreme excellence: to possess things from the past, i.e. accumulated, crystallized history, aristocratic names and titles, chateaux or 'stately homes', paintings and collections, vintage wines and antique furniture, is to master time, through all those things whose common feature is that they can only be acquired in the course of time, by means of time, against time, that is, by inheritance or through dispositions which, like the taste for old things, are likewise only acquired with time and applied by those who can take their time" (*Distinction*, p.71).

Not only time becomes a dimension of wealth, it is as if things can secure immortality; as if they can vanquish the poverty of the spirit and the feebleness of the body. Today's parents are fetishists who consistently weaken their children with the consumerist lifestyle. As Mitchell and Reid-Walsh note in their research on children's popular culture, a child's bedroom has become the nest or "haven of 'hyper consumerism' and popular culture fantasy" (113). In fact, the room, in itself, can be regarded as punishment, for, the authors further note that "[b]eing sent to one's room, as we see represented in the children's book by Maurice Sendak *Where the Wild Things Are* (1983) is regarded as punishment; it is not the same as going there freely..." (113).

I would venture further in this connection: Consumerism is punishment!

Yet, consumerism is imposed on children as early as birth, and even prior to it. First, possible future parents strive to "liberate" themselves financially and so they "liberate" themselves from the child — contraceptives is one tactic that is extremely profitable for the medical industry, sterilisation is another, which annihilates the idea of conception and creation itself and brings us back to consumerism as being the vehicle for impotence and sterility.

But when the possible finally become actual parents and get a child, they immediately set off to "liberate" themselves from the child again — this time with baby-sitters, nursery, day-care, school, tutors, extensions, etc. so as to be able to consecrate their time yet again to the "more important": earning money and serving the "public" good (which public and what good is another question raised by the statistics on poverty and jail above) by earning money and serving the offspring by earning money and spending it on strangers — the "professionals" — thinking that they thus provide care, health, safety, and curriculum. The more they earn, the

more they claim to love, to be good parents and good members of society, and the more things they acquire.

But things do not appease the child's not yet stifled craving for love in the other, the non-material sense. The child screams and demands something which often neither she nor the adults know how to articulate, or perhaps even are not fully aware of — possibly a primeval instinct of being cuddled, snuggled, nursed, looked at, sniffed, pampered, protected, respected, and other such animal stuff. Instead, the civilised Homo Sapiens fights these instincts and imposes "independence" that amounts to: "my child is independent when s/he does not intrude into my space but has her own space which touches mine occasionally, between the baby-sitters, day-care, school, and work and without disrupting me".

Since money and objects have come to symbolise, and have even replaced, love, the child demands more and more and does not understand why all this love in the form of things does not appease the other, the primordial, the unspoken of and the repressed urge; that is until it mutes. Since how much a child is "loved" is also an indication of the child's place in society, then by the same logic, the more the child has the better s/he is expected to feel among people. Envy, competition, rivalry are bred by consumerism; and the fetishism of contemporary world demands ever more sacrifices and things.

At this point, a mini synthesis will help connect the above observations to the next part of the essay. Love, as a social construct, has undergone many operations. In a consumerist age, its meaning has become that of provision of things and the accumulation of capital to the point of loss of contact between people. Because things and capital derive their existence in a context of pain, exploitation and lies, any replacement of a living being with things replaces love with pain, exploitation and lies.

Apart from unhappiness, this breeds pathological mistrust between people on many levels: adults distrust each other; they distrust their own children and children grow up to distrust everyone