

Dictatorship of the Consumer

The incompatibility of democracy and free market totality

By Andrew Hedden

Browsing through the American Constitution, one might notice that "happiness," as in, "pursuit of," is never defined. Thanks to our nation's economic devices, however, one need look much further than the private business sector, who have developed one for us, all with a subservient culture to boot. From sea to shining sea, from shining set of white teeth to shiny new SUV, consumerism has become both the means and end to happiness in the modern age. A direct result of the need to push product, it is now ever present for any American from childhood. To this point, witness the ill-suited title of the "Happy Meal."

It's not that individuals are unable to determine for themselves what happiness entails; it's that predominant and constant influences encourage and condition a passive role in the matter. A democratic society, freedom, liberty, and all, is first and foremost reliant on participation in decision-making. That's just fundamental. When that process is, to a prevailing degree, reduced to a choice in a grocery store, the control lies solely in the hands of those administering the product. With happiness translating as "he who dies with the most toys wins," the benefactor then, is not society at large, but rather that private business sector.

This private sector is, for the most part, what public education attempts to condition its students for. The ever present question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" takes precedence over youthful forethought from the earliest age. For assorted reasons, many students fail to apply themselves in these efforts; perhaps it's vying with the Happy Meal for gray matter. At any rate, those who do acknowledge the fateful inquiry are funneled through a "Career Pathway." The political consciousness of most is then usurped by the need to invest in the dream of some future employment.

Hence, politics becomes little more than another profession and democracy, simply a job for someone else. New York City's new billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, himself a product of this sad trend, unintentionally highlighted the point with his recent likening of the position of mayor to that of a corporate CEO.

A myriad of business literature exists purporting that such market place totality is the end all solution for a content public and scientific, technological progress (all to serve capital, and in turn, to be served by it). These writings imagine a place where, in order to serve society, the call is heralded: Go forth and consume!

Then again, perhaps this isn't the product of an overactive imagination at all, but rather a description of the current recession. Patty Murray's recent economic stimulus bill was titled, interestingly enough, "Let's go shopping!" Meanwhile, George W. Bush promises tax cuts and rebate checks will upright the nation via consumer spending (though he seems oblivious to his own economic designs, telling reporters he planned to give his check to charity, adding "It's something people ought to do!").

Either frightening or amusing, depending on your level of cynicism, this constantly runs the risk of dressing up Vladimir Lenin's State doctrine in capitalist drag. Authority tends to wear shades of make-up: in the communist's case, citizens must uphold the "dictatorship of the proletariat;" in our case, it is to maintain the "wealth of the economy," or perhaps, a "dictatorship of the consumer." Either way, imperative human capabilities are circumscribed in order to serve a larger apparatus overseen by a class of "professionals."

Though it is important to note that greater amounts of freedom have existed under the Western system and not the other, the point is this: in a free society, repressive authority cannot undertake the outright bluntness of a totalitarian state, no matter how much it would like to (and often times, it would really, really like to). Instead it employs more subtle methods, increasingly harder to acknowledge. This amounts to what are largely inherent and systematic elements of capitalism: in the case of the "wealth of the economy," it is the need for polarized classes. Thus, we have business's definition of "happiness," the constraints of consumerism, permeating throughout popular culture and allowing exclusionary ideologies to reign, albeit indirectly.

Without perpetual, and intense scrutiny, this ever present phenomena just might up and go omnipresent, faster than you can ask, "Did someone say McDonald's?" That, in the words of capital culture critic Thomas Frank, it may put "itself beyond our power of imagining because it has become our imagination, it has become our power to envision, and describe, and theorize, and resist." Something under which democracy becomes less of a platform for individual political involvement, means to a healthier society, and more of a superficial private parlor game. Be it ice cream parlor, or a beauty parlor, the real decision-making remains beyond the public's grasp.

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If anything is a testament to humanity's natural tendency towards mutual support, it is the desire for supportive social interaction still remains despite civilization's attempts to crush it. If our social needs are to be fulfilled, then a return to valuing and participating in supportive social interaction must take place. Mutual support does not require strictly altruistic behavior, but instead is based on reciprocal altruism, where reliance and trust relationships are formed to provide for all through egalitarian distribution methods. What we need is to organize our own decentralized egalitarian support structures to become less reliant upon the current economic system, while at the same time addressing all of the interdependent aspects of culture which keep us from manifesting egalitarian and environmentally sustainable communities.

