

To Be in America

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A young man, no older than seventeen, rises in the morning, reluctant and restless, to attend school, to witness diversity and socialize, and to learn, as mandated by those governing his country, the United States of America. He walks into his kitchen to grab breakfast before he leaves, begrudgingly acknowledging a lecture from his mother and father about the evils of the twenty-first century – the prevalence of drugs on the street, the rampant violence, the abhorrent depiction of sex in the media, the entitled mentality of socialism. When he senses the end of the lecture - he is hardly listening – he waves goodbye and gets into his car. In the fifteen minutes it takes for him to weave through traffic to reach his high school, he sees two billboards advertising violent movies, flips through the radio and hears three songs romanticizing drug abuse and exploitative sex, and hears radio talk show hosts joke about the uselessness of a college degree. He then parks his car and walks into school, where he observes five students - who he easily identifies as honors students- surreptitiously attempt to (and, consequently, fail to) steal answers to an exam that kept him awake for several hours. He also witnesses two drug deals in the empty hallways, and hears six racist comments as he passes an poster that ironically celebrates diversity.

A retrospective observation of the the United States of America’s recent history leads to the observation that it is no longer appropriate to appeal to the generalized label of “melting pot,” or even argue that a respect for diversity exists as a standard in this country. It is true that the United States has just as many social issues as it has admirable

qualities; yet it is the identification of the aforementioned qualities and the understand of their relationship to each other that defines the quality of life in this nation.

As a millennial who has lived through one of the nation's more drastic socio-cultural and political, and economic transitions, I understand that knowledge of the gaps between the values professed and the courses of action actually taken highlights the ways in which blind patriotism can corrupt moral values and respect for humankind. The values of both "good" and "bad" capitalism, and to an extent, neo-liberalism, have been called "The American Dream". Many academics have made a distinction between what they deem "good" and "bad" capitalism. "Good" capitalism appears to be founded in nations of social democracy where the social costs which businesses carry enable them to function as social institutions without undermining the cohesion of the larger societies in which they operate. In turn, these costs are compensated for through the higher taxes that entrepreneurs pay in social democratic societies. By contrast, companies born of the free market, neo-liberal model have less obligations socially, resulting in the lack of necessity to pay the higher taxes and almost float free of the societies in which they operate. This limits the ability of companies born of socially embedded markets to compete with those of free markets (Horsley). Misconceptions of the benefits of capitalism have been woven so intricately into daily life – especially rampant in the pressures of the young and ambitious – that, without a world, knowledge of economy, our particular generation often forgets the mere power of knowledge, of sharing and of a harmonious, altruistic and utopian society.

These attitudes have developed concurrently with increased respect for particular modes of self-expression – such as the “quirky,” the artistic, those who defy heteronormativity – and more increased awareness of social issues long ignored and unresolved – such as racial injustices and gender inequalities. However, the amount of public attention given to such issues that are aligned with the importance that individuals and groups place on the deeply ingrained values of a capitalistic society, leading some to prioritize the maintenance of the status quo over real change.

As the self-proclaimed “land of opportunity,” education has a very dominant role in the United States, though its ultimate purpose has long since taken on an ambiguous nature. The young man living in the States, at first, is eager to learn, but as he falls into the routine of secondary education and higher learning, he sees the pressure of obtaining exceptional grades to excel in order to earn admission to a university, and in turn needing to have an exceptional college GPA and the ability to rub elbows with those possessing social capital to receive a degree, a job, or place in graduate school before he can even dream of finding a career that earns money, a subjective factor of success in a business-run society. He sees it in the glances his peers throw during tests, the bags under their eyes indicating long nights of studying, and in scars across arms – physical manifestations of stress and isolation, and there is a point in time where one can observe that school is no longer a hub for receiving knowledge and understanding the diversity and talents observed within the individual, but also a checkpoint on the path of capitalism.

At the point in time where society is at the height of innovation and technology, corporations, the state and federal governments cannot be ignored because “knowledge is not easily separable from the new economy” (Slaughter and Rhoades). In the information society, knowledge is treated as, much like lumber or any other resource, raw material to be converted to different processes, services and products. Because universities are the largest and most visible capital of knowledge, they work towards building a relationship with those heavily involved in economy. Autonomy, the “preferred but perhaps always fictive position of universities with regard to capital and the state, ” is becoming more obsolete, less plausible (Slaughter and Rhoades). The concept of academic capitalism emphasizes circuits – webs of knowledge, interwoven organizational emergence, networks that flit between the public aspect of the economy and the wealthier, private sector, more mobility for authority – that link establishments as well as staff, their superiors, members of academia and students to the new economy. Altogether, a capitalist academic administration is formed.

The young man soon departs from school, trying to forget about the hassle of assignments, of papers, of sneering peers, of college applications and hovering parents becoming a series of dark, daunting rainclouds over his head. As he walks to his car, he reaches for his phone, knowing a classmate who specialized in selling contraband and who lived right around the corner.

Like the young man, the state-of-mind of consumers is partly due to pressure of the society they live in, the need to have stimulation to lose themselves in.

Consider the war on drugs. It is often misconstrued that most consumers that dabble in contraband become addicted – the action of becoming addicted becoming a serious offense to society - when medically it is the exact opposite ("DrugFacts: Understanding Drug Abuse and Addiction"). In order to cease the conflict, it is important to understand the reason why drug usage becomes an option for others. Often, consumers turn to drugs for recreational purposes, for pleasure.

Bruce Alexander, a professor in Vancouver, explains it in a simple experiment he created. He had a rat in a cage, and left the cage empty save for two bottles: one bottle filled with just water, and the other filled with water laced with a drug like heroin or cocaine. It is logical to assume that the rat will choose the latter bottle every time, and in Alexander's case, there was no exception. However, after building a Rat Park – a cage where there are other rats to socialize with, toys to play with, a bounty of food and opportunity to reproduce – and keeping the two bottles, Alexander found that the rats rarely chose the bottle laced with drugs, leading Alexander to the conclusion that environment is a significant factor in the motivation to turn to contraband; the environment, if dissatisfying, is less appealing than the drug.

This has much deeper implications for capitalism than one initially considers. If Alexander's experiment has any merit to it, it is safe to say that consumers have created a society where the less personal, more money-happy bulk of citizens feel the need to transcend, or step away from the world- a "hyper-consumerist, hyper-individualist, isolated world." (Klein) Society has become the first cage in the experiment – an abysmal place with limited options. It is believed that the polar opposite of addiction is sobriety,

when really, its polar opposite is connection – when consumers step back from spending, buying and perpetuating a vicious cycle and connection with others on a deeper, personal level. Journalist Johann Hari says that we are “...in fact...trained from a very young age to focus our hopes and our dreams and our ambitions on things we can buy and consume. And drug addiction is really a subset of that.” (Klein)

Dr. Gabor Mate, after studying the repercussions of addiction, has a particular point of view:

If decade after decade, after decade, after decade, if the intentions of the policies are not being realized; in fact the opposite is what it is happening ... maybe it's serving some purpose, a maintaining, a rational, the *raison d'être* of repressive apparatus that can be used against the people when the need arises. Is it really a failure or maybe it has a function of demonizing a certain section of population that justifies more repression? May be it has a function of keeping the legal apparatus going, may it has a function of making a money for a lot of people, may be it has a function of fueling the privatized to incarceration industry... Well, it is for the people who died there, for a half a million Iraqis who died it is but it is not a failure for American oil companies. So that everywhere we have to be careful before we call them a failure. Somebody wins. Somebody who wins are the same people who destroy neighborhoods, communities. It is the same system that undermines human health, that undermines dignity, that undermines human connections that really makes life less tolerable on this planet. Now, we don't have to agree on what the solutions might be. And that's okay. But what do we

agree on is the importance of speaking for truth, but what we do agree is on importance of people getting together and struggling in a healthy way for different life. Because if it's the loss of control, and the isolation and the suppression of self expression that are the greatest cause for stress then surely one to has to distress the culture and get together express yourself and not to be silent and to connect with human beings (Kwan).

For obsessions with violence, sex, and drugs to arise in the first place, one should evaluate their yearnings with capitalist material goods, whether it has to do with other human bodies, cars, or money. It is an inherent desire for one to have certain things in life, but when one ventures too close to the reality of the actual value of these objects, one transitions into actions of some other kind, of a compulsive kind, or even, to some extent, a mania. This displaced circulation of objects does something to humans and constitutes a (capitalist) precondition for addictions. The process of sliding into the displaced order can be exemplified by a gambler who feels that he is able to affect or predict the outcome of the game or that he is chosen by destiny to get the big win. This is crucial for his desire to game, even though his beliefs can easily be contradicted by the mathematical (un)likelihood of winning, or just by any common reasoning. Nevertheless, the gambler must buy into this illusion when he initiates the gaming, and – after a while – he may be propelled into the displaced addicted order, in which his hierarchy of needs and priorities have become different ("Where There Is Capitalism, There Shall Be Addiction.")...

In the same way in the hyper-connected society of the United States, there is an ironic massive emotional shutdown, which expresses itself in the increasing violence in the media culture. In fact, a report released in September 2000 by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) showed that 80 percent of “R” rated movies, 70 percent of video games with a restricted rating, and 100 percent of music displaying “explicit content” warning labels were being marketed to minors (Fernandez and Richards). Over the years, movies have become increasingly gorier. Excessive violence in sporting events is deemed acceptable. Scenes featuring actors beating each other to bloody pulps with no mercy on television and in movies have become normalized. The entertainment industry capitalizes on society’s collectively apathetic responses to the portrayal of emotional and physical extremes, as the normalization of such insensitivity requires more titillating scenarios to engage the audience’s interest.

The argument that the United States is not truly the land of the free could very well be met by emphatic and patriotically-inspired cries of protest. It is not to say that the United States is completely dystopian; the extent of our freedoms of speech, for instance, is one of the larger ones in the world, and the grotesque nature of civilian deaths in war-torn nations gives Americans another blessing to count. However, a great deal of progress must be made in order for the ideals of social harmony to be realized, and it begins with the evaluation of how a society that promises liberty and justice to all understands and acts upon both the positive and negative aspects of capitalism, and consider its implications and effects on both collective society and the individual.

Consider the bumblebee:

“It has been said that the bumblebee should, physiologically speaking, not be able to fly. However, the bee is unaware of this fact and will therefore fly around and be happy in its unawareness of this fact. The capitalist subject is, in the same manner, an impossible structure. When capitalism functions well it is because we are not aware of its impossibility. [A] compulsive gambler is like the bumblebee that has suddenly admitted a truth regarding capitalism, which makes it impossible for him to function in the capitalistic society. He has come too close to the money (Bjerg).”

The work of analysts and researchers yields compelling evidence that the capitalistic practices have far-reaching effects, and it becomes increasingly inexcusable for citizens with access to this information to claim the blissful ignorance that bumblebees display. There exist myriad reasons for addiction, for corruption in education, for desire to spend money and observe violence, yet there are telling signs intertwined with all of these that point to the ingrained nature of those living in America, as the beings – arguably - at the height of civilization, within capitalism and how they have been wholly introduced to values in America. If the young man, no older than seventeen, rises one particular morning, reluctant and restless, and realizes that maybe he is not as familiar with the world around him as he thought he was, he could bring the nation one person closer to awareness, one person closer to change, and one person closer to the truth.

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