

Modern Times

Felix Frost

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We're living in modern times, and nowhere is more modern than the USA — the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave. But what is it that makes “the American dream” fundamentally different than any society that has existed before us? The answer is mass consumerism, or to be precise: commodification. In our society everything is made into commodities; goods or services that can be exchanged on a market. Surely markets and money have existed for thousands of years, but it only comprised a tiny fraction of society. Not until this century did the market economy become the dominant way of life; increasingly taking over every aspect of people's existence.

There is no longer any obvious relationship between production of goods and their use. Instead all products are produced for the sole purpose of making a profit for people who are not even part of the production process. It makes no difference whether or not the products are actually useful for someone. As long as a company is making a profit, it is considered contributing to the national economy and the common good. Not for profit activities are on the other hand not counted as “real” production, no matter what kind of usable goods or services they yield.

But things are worse than this. In order to obtain the necessary goods, most people are forced to make their own bodies into a commodity; renting it out at a market for the highest price. To improve your value on the job market, you might invest in education, but your most important “job skill” is to learn how to take orders and perform your tasks like a robot. Remember, the customers are always right, because with their money, they buy a small slice of your time. At work, you are no longer free, you are a rented tool to be used in the production of profit. The job market not only makes yourself into a commodity but even time itself. Your working hours cease to exist as your own, but are made into rigid units of measurement, dead time that serve you no other purpose than earning money to be spent in your remaining “free” time. This “free” time is where you are supposed to realise your desires and live out your dreams. But dreams and desires are like everything else made into commodities to be bought and sold on the market. Thus modern life has no other meaning than to consume.

Politics and elections are likewise made into commodities that are marketed in the exact same way as deodorants or cars or any other product. 30 second soundbites tell us that if you choose presidential candidate X instead of Y, the country will prosper and you'll have a better life. Of course, everyone knows that the commercials lie and that there are no significant differences between the candidates. But then, there are no significant differences between Pepsi and Coke

either, and no one really believes the commercials that tell you that “things go better with Coke.” Why should politics be any different? People generally pay little attention, and simply vote for the guy who looks best on TV.

The only part of life that is considered exempt from this dreary routine is the “family.” In the past, families were the fundamental building blocks of society. Today they are the negation of society: The family is where you escape from the world around you. The family is where you can take out your frustrations on your loved ones, without making waves in the social order. This is of course why conservative politicians love the family so much.

The tyrants of the past defended their rule by declaring that they were appointed by God himself to be his representatives on earth. Likewise today’s rulers claim to be put there by the actions of the holy “invisible hand” of the market. And just like the scholars of the past studied the holy scriptures to discern the will of the almighty; today the bourgeoisie send their sons and daughters to universities to try to learn the laws of the market. But no matter how hard they study; they never manage to penetrate the inscrutable ways of the capitalist economy. Every time a new economic crisis hit; the capitalists are just as perplexed. Even though the world is their own product; it appears strange and foreign to them. So strong is the alienation of today that even the rulers of our society are blinded by it.

What is then left to be done by the few of us who are not content with being spectators to our own exploitation, and who still wish for a free life? Are we to “hurl ourselves at the wheels of the machine to try to stop it with our own bodies,” as was the cry of radical students in the sixties? Or are we to turn our back to the empire in order to eke out a living on the margins of society where we can attempt to build our own free communes? Or perhaps we should bide our time and wait for ampler opportunities to come for an all out assault on the establishment. Maybe we can’t halt the juggernaut of capitalism, but let us at least strew some sand in its machinery, if only to maintain our own dignity and self-respect.

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