

Imagination and consumer culture

Rana Dasgupta

rana_dasgupta@yahoo.com

"How can you tell if you are happy?"

It is a difficult question; but answers are at hand. The man at the fair says, "You **must** be happy. We have a catalogue of unhappy people - and you are not in it!"

"Show us! Show us the unhappy people!"

He opens the book of drawings. There are people who live under the horrible burden of Islam. There are people who are not allowed to vote. There are people who have to share a television with their neighbours. And there are all the people, so many millions of them, who were unfortunate enough to live before now. They always had to do what society said, lived primarily in black and white, and never knew any of life's simplest pleasures - like driving home to irresponsibly loud, CD-quality Britney Spears.

It is true. Those people must be incurably sad. When you think about it, their lives must be hell. By simple logic, we must be happy. Blissfully, infinitely happy.

The question is answered. At first it seemed to require introspection, but luckily it requires none.

Can we extract a definition of happiness from this inversion of unhappiness?

Happiness is freedom. And freedom is consumer culture.

The conclusion is paradoxical in one respect. Consumer culture has been built by the greatest project of social engineering ever undertaken by human beings. The homogenisation of many hundreds of millions of lives under a more-or-less uniform social and economic framework that is not markedly different whether your shopping mall is in Sao Paulo or Los Angeles. It is a framework that is built on vast systems that require an intense ordering of every life that is to comply with them: the system of credit, the system of advertising, the system of highways...

That is not how consumer culture presents itself. It presents itself as a constant Mardi Gras with no Lent, an unending cocktail party of glamorous, self-made mavericks. Consumer culture loves its myths of excess and dissent. Those that dared to be different. How important is the icon of the brilliantly unconventional pop star who cares only to play his music - society be damned! - and seek out his idiosyncratic gratification. (Or **hers**. Female pop stars have the added benefit of a cleavage, an important symbol of liberty. Cleavages signify that we have broken all barriers and prove to those who doubted that consumer culture is one big fiesta, a never ending carnival of sexual promise.)

But most of us do not experience life like this. The alter ego of the pop star, and his precondition, is a much more telling icon of consumer culture: the business manager. Consumer culture is managed culture, and the behaviour that is encouraged in most individuals is not the reckless abandon of all norms but a deep psychological attachment to them. If we were to try to map consumer culture onto medieval Catholicism, pop stars would be the angels who supply the image of bliss that is the rationale for our daily routines of abstinence, prayer and repentance.

This deep attachment to norms manifests itself in a hypersensitivity to the abnormal, in the self and in others. It is among the middle classes of the United States, where the dream of a self completely liberated by the perfection of consumer culture is strongest, that this fear of non-conformity is most heightened.

(A study of the use of the word "weird" as used in that milieu would yield interesting results. "Am I being weird?" Or simply, as a way of categorising and distancing oneself from behaviour that has no archetype within consumer culture, "That's weird!")

Americans are particularly prone to detecting psychological pathologies within themselves precisely because they feel that in America happiness should be automatic. "I have education and a job and CNN. And I am not happy. I am clearly not normal." Naturally, the way to eradicate all abnormalities is more consumption - this time, of psychoanalysis.

This intolerance towards "weird" behaviour makes consumer culture - and consumers - rather unsympathetic towards scenes like these:

- A group of people find an empty house and decide to live in it together. They do not want the house to go to waste and they do not wish to compound the loneliness of city life by living on their own.
- A group of unemployed friends shares a single CD of Microsoft Windows 98. They cannot each afford to pay for it, but neither can they afford the social and professional costs of not having it.
- A woman discovers that her local supermarket throws out a huge container-load of food every day because it has reached its sell-by date. The food is fresh and sealed. Since she never has the money for groceries she starts to visit the container every evening to stock her fridge with meat and vegetables.
- A man likes the feel of smooth stone under his bare feet. He walks around for some time in a big shopping mall with his shoes and socks in his hands paying attention to the feeling of the stone on his soles. Then he becomes tired and sits on the ground in front of the window of Gap. He looks up at the other people walking by.

These are humdrum, everyday kinds of behaviour. None of these scenes presents characters that could be said to be fanatical or irrational. And yet I am sure we can imagine that they might in real life arouse suspicion or hostility from observers. They might receive charges of madness or criminality. Some of them could even end up in jail.

It is no surprise that a supermarket would try to prevent people from stocking their kitchens with its waste. In that way it will lose revenues from those who otherwise would have had to pay for their food. What is surprising is the extent to which ordinary people who have no stake in the supermarket's profits feel equally suspicious of people like our imaginary woman. I see her as furtive, operating after dark, hoping no one is about. No one is thanking her for reducing the mountain of the supermarket's waste.

Consumption, and the lifestyle it necessitates, has become the number one social duty. There are penalties for those who wish to live other lives, penalties that are not only financial and legal, but also social. The delight that consumer culture takes in all that is forbidden elsewhere - "Imagine, children, a place where men and women may not even look at each other" - is a diversion from the fact that here such traditional regimes of prohibition have been replaced by new ones that are less brutal but also more profound, for they do not deny our libido but rather harness it for other ends.

This profound experience of consumer culture, this exhilarating and also draining experience, is one that seems to have the effect of evacuating the reality from everything that happens outside it. That the word 'consumer' is so often used, particularly, again, in the United States, as a synonym for 'human being' is an indication of the fact that people in consumer culture often do not feel very much in common with those who may be human beings but who are not 'consumers'. A sense of solidarity with others arises through a shared experience of consumer culture, not through the recognition of things that are more universal: the need for food and shelter, the need for relationships and stability. A middle-class Londoner's relationship to a middle-class Berliner is one of shared culture inflected by national difference. His relationship to a slum dweller in Delhi is bewilderment. He cannot enter this reality, and can only mutter words of pity that this creature is not like himself.

This is why the rape, in broad daylight, of a woman in Manhattan, is a human tragedy, whereas the death annually of millions from malaria, cholera or simple diarrhoea is a vague, insubstantial statistic. The people who try to communicate the severity of such things speak a language that most people cannot understand.

Much of what passes for ethics these days is actually nostalgia. Nostalgia for when consumerism was good, everybody shared the profits, nation states were generous, and there were no Indonesian sweatshops.

But there are people who are beginning to understand what an ethics of the global economy might look like. They are hampered in their search by the fact that there are not words to express some of the concepts that are crucial for their arguments to make sense.

There is thus a need for imagination. Not just: Imagine an airy new kitchen with the latest in Scandinavian design! Not just: Imagine a world where wireless Internet is a reality! There is a need for an imagination that will turn the clichés of consumer culture inside out and bring new perspectives.