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THE FREE MARKET CONSUMER IDEOLOGY

I will pull down my barns and build bigger barns.

—Luke 12:18

The free market consumer ideology rests on four pillars: Scarcity, Certainty, Perfection, and Privatization. We take as true and inevitable that the contracts of commerce, resting on these pillars, which produce the commercial order, are the defining producer of our cultural order.

The culture produced by the free market consumer ideology relies on the idea of needs—real or manufactured—that can only be satisfied by production, distribution, and purchase. Monopoly is the unstated intention. It stands on autonomy as an organizing principle of culture; it is indifferent to gifts. When the apostle Paul asks, “What do you have that you have not been given?” the neighborly culture would say

that everything I have has been given. The free market consumer ideology declares that everything I have I've earned.

This contract culture sends us down a track laid down by systems. In the systems world, whatever is un-organized and un-managed does not exist. Institutions are its structure of preference, and the "free" market a core conviction. Its idea of free is the absence of limits and restraints. There should be no restraints when it comes to production, distribution, or creating a compelling reason to purchase.

This reliance on needs, autonomy, and "free" supports the market's core beliefs in scarcity, certainty, perfection, and privatization.

SCARCITY

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

—I Cor. 13:1–2

Foundational to a culture ordered by contract is the question of whether there is enough to go around. Market and contract value only what is scarce.

If we construct an economy where quantities are controlled, based on the belief there is never enough for all, then we must compete to determine the winners. We begin this with grades in the first grade. There is the presumption that competition is essential and so there must be a normal distribution of grades. All students cannot receive high marks. If I get an A, someone in the class must perform poorly. It is an early lesson in how the marketplace ideology works. In a community organized around abundance, competition will occur, but it is not built into the system as a core design element. In a neighborly culture, the abundance of resources becomes the design element.

Scarcity is the deep belief that no matter how much we have, it is not enough. Therefore, more scale and growth is always required. Grow or die. The system of scarcity feeds on itself. We deny the abundance of the wilderness. This is the argument for free market consumption. This is what produces or manufactures scarcity. There is enough food to feed

the world, but if the food were simply fully distributed, the market for food, as we know it, would collapse.

Both scarcity and abundance breed more of themselves. The practice of abundance is itself generative of more abundance. Agri-business is the practice of scarcity; it's like a cancer cell, which grows and grows until it destroys its host. Scarcity has the effect of destroying the host, the planet, and its ecology. Good farming is the practice of abundance. The soil becomes richer. It causes the land to generate more food for the neighborhood.

It isn't just that there is enough, but the practice of a belief in abundance makes more available. Theologically, what that means is if you practice abundance, God gives more.

Love has the same effect. It produces more of itself.

There is a conservative psychologist in Abilene, Texas, who talks about how leprosy is treated in the Bible: You don't want to touch someone with leprosy because you will get the disease. What he says is that Jesus touched lepers, but the process worked the other way: His health was transferred to the leper rather than leprosy being transferred to Him.

CERTAINTY AND PERFECTION

The free market consumer ideology promises a world of predictability and safety. It is repulsed by surprise and believes that all things are eventually knowable.

It believes in the limitless possibility of development and growth. You must strive for perfection, "failure is not an option." This applies to individuals, enterprises, and countries. Individuals are always a work in progress, enterprises grow or die, poor countries need to be developed by rich countries. Death is simply a medical failing, correctable over time. Human suffering is solvable by better and more services. Planetary risks will be solved by technology. Promoting and ensuring progress is the priority.

PRIVATIZATION

No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.

—Deut. 23:3

The free market system is addicted to privatization. If it is a not-for-profit, if it's government, if it's schools, we have to make it more like a business. And so we have been privatizing for about 250 years, which means we have diverted resources from the common good and put them into the private sector.

The privatization that began with British enclosure was a violation of community. It was the removal of the rights of the commoners to use the land. The overthrow of the common good. And the covenant we have with each other.

THE INSTITUTIONAL ASSUMPTIONS

These four ideas—scarcity, certainty, perfection, and privatization—lead to ways of thinking we call the institutional assumptions. That means that I see my being, my future, the future I want to travel as one where the road is laid by the great institutions of society. If they are working, then I'm moving right down the highway. If they aren't working, then they need to be fixed with a bigger road-laying machine.

BETTER MANAGEMENT/TECHNOLOGY IS THE FIX

The fix for broken institutions is usually thought of in terms of questions of management or technology: How can we better manage this big machine, or what new technological invention can we bring to it that will make it finally lay the right road for me? This way of thinking rests on the premise that if we really compete and perform effectively, the cream will rise to the top. We will have the best technology and the best management at the top, and then down the highway we go. The market ideology has a near-religious trust in management and efficiency and a good interstate highway system.

The institutions that now provide the road are not just the institutions of commerce; they include those we call not-for-profits: the health and welfare institutions and the institutions of government. We hold the mechanistic idea in most all of our solutions that we have to fix the institutions. Individuals and the community are relegated to wait for the institutional fix. We simply play our part as members of the institution.

That machine cannot be fixed. It has done all it can do. And wherever we are going to go, it's a path that is constructive, not additive. We are going to have to re-conceive the nature of departure.

INTERPERSONAL IS A PROBLEM

A key tenet of institutions is that anything that is personal is a problem to be solved. Also, all things interpersonal are likewise problems to be solved. This is the beauty of automation. This thinking is basically about de-personalizing relationships. Institutions hold that we are not dependent on the unique characteristics of a small group of people. They care most about continuity, replication, and management. Everyone is dispensable.

When institutions talk about “going to scale” it means moving away from personal relationships. The very heart of institutionalization is to deny the value of unique human beings interacting together in productive ways and to replace this with a machine or digital account. It's the move from the tribe to the dynamo. And, in a sense, that is the track that western civilization has taken: the move from community to mechanistic institutionalization. We have bought the story that this is progress. Now we are looking for a path away from the notion that market success is progress.

COMPETITION TRUMPS TRUST

A culture of contest and contract regards everyone else as a competitor or a rival or a threat. So you never trust. It is a world that values dominance. A culture of covenant and neighborliness depends on trust. All the research and political theory about associational life says its base is trust. Money does not hold it together. The currency of contracts is money. The currency of covenant is trust.

The neighborly covenant replaces contracts with vows, which are simply unspecified promises. We have to decide whether we will trust a person's vow. If someone breaks a vow, there is no legal recourse as there is in a contract. When the Amish sold land, they wrote out the title deed, and the seller kept the document. The buyer, who normally takes possession of the deed, would hand it to the seller and say, “Well, why don't you keep that, so it'll remind you.”

Trust is the glue of a communal narrative. It is a given, the absolute without which all the rest doesn't work. If employees have trust in an employer, then they know that they are not a displaceable part, but a member of the organization, the community. When that is not so, trust has all but disappeared.

TOWARD A NEIGHBORLY CULTURE

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

—Lev. 19:18

There is no need to construct a world where we have to choose between systems and the communal path. There are limitations to localism, just as there are benefits to systems. The point is to overcome our isolation . . . to discover a way where we begin to have affection for the land and the commons.

We know we can't raise our children on our own. Even if we choose to home school our children, this won't work for all. We need schools. We just have to stop asking the school to raise our children. We want to re-formulate the systems we need to support the neighborly culture, not reform the ones we already have. We want to construct a communal world, one in which the functions that systems perform are congruent with what the community needs. When communities are fully functioning, when they are doing all the things they can do themselves, then we can re-discover what systems we need and what for.

We might ask then: What would a system look like that built neighborliness and covenantal relationships? It could begin with the question of how a human services system can create for its own workers the same cultural experience that it is intending to bring into the world. This would enable systems to support the kind of communal culture we are exploring.

A CULTURE BASED ON COVENANT

The alternative to the free market consumer culture is a set of covenants that supports neighborly disciplines, rather than market disciplines, as a producer of culture. These non-market disciplines have to do with the

common good and abundance as opposed to self-interest and scarcity. This neighborly culture is held together by its depth of relatedness, its capacity to hold mystery, its willingness to stretch time and endure silence. It affirms its patience with fallibility, its appreciation of the value of re-performing aspects of a subsistence culture. For example, it calls for the right use of money, a willingness to eat food slowly, in season—food that is unprocessed and produced nearby.

This world stands in stark contrast to the dominant contractual and consumer culture that pivots around autonomy, independence, isolation, and a longing for certainty—and is always in a hurry. It is a shift away from a culture impatient with faith not based on reason, and wary of fidelity without recent results. Suppose I have done nothing for you lately?

The market culture has witnessed the disappearance of the neighborhood; it has seen neighborly relations bested by automatic garage door openers and the rise of the convenience store. I no longer need to borrow sugar; I can purchase it 24/7. This takes us to a different kingdom: neighborliness.