

Consumer Capitalism: Removing Impediments to Oral-Narcissistic Pleasure. *Clio's Psyche* (2011, in press).

Donald Carveth—York University

In “The Family Romance Transformed,” Ken Fuchsman (*Clio's Psyche*) asks: “Why are more than two of every five American children now living separately from continuously married parents?” The answers he suggests include: “changing sexual, gender and relational standards, the rise of female employment, the flourishing consumer culture, rising expectations for fulfillment and success, and less confidence in the stability of long-term relationships.” He writes that:

American marriages in the 1920s began emphasizing companionship rather than separate spheres for spouses. Fulfillment and pleasure was to be sought in deep, intimate, sexual-spiritual marital unions. Modern western culture was moving toward a pleasure-oriented conception of life as the satisfaction of desires and longings, emphasizing the needs and aspirations of the self—whether in a relationship or not. Then, from the 1960s onward, there was a “transition from...companionate to individualistic marriage.” This meant that “contemporary marriage” was envisioned as providing “enhanced freedom, possibilities for self-development, and potential for egalitarian relationships.”

I wish merely to underline the role of advanced consumer capitalism in generating this individualistic, “pleasure-oriented conception of life as the satisfaction of desires and longings.” Such desires are continuously stimulated by corporate advertising, which seeks constantly to provoke the oral-narcissistic cravings, envy and greed that drive the hedonism and acquisitiveness upon which consumer capitalism depends.

Such oral narcissism, envy and greed belong to what Melanie Klein called the paranoid-schizoid position, the most primitive level of mental functioning. In this position the “other” is not yet fully real for the narcissistic subject; relation to it occurs only through identification in which, according to Freud, the other merely represents the self that I was, or am, or would like to be. Mature love—in which the other is not me, but other to and different from me—is not attainable in this position.

Is it then any surprise that, in a consumer capitalist society dependent upon continuous stimulation of primitive oral narcissism, community disintegrates into a collectivity of self-seeking, competitive individuals? Here, striving to maximize personal pleasure, we are ready to abandon the others since they are barely real to us—perhaps even our children as soon as they confront our imperial and imperious selves with their annoying needs and differences.

In advanced consumer capitalism, what Marx described as “commodity fetishism” is extended to the personal and interpersonal spheres in which the “other” and even the self become commodities to be used, consumed, occasionally “refurbished,” but more often discarded when they no longer yield a significant profit over loss. Martin Buber’s “I-It” relations increasingly displace the “I-Thou.”

Just as global capitalism works to disintegrate local, national or international restrictions that inhibit market forces, as individuals we refuse restrictions upon or inhibitions of our free pursuit of gratification. We are often willing to make substantial financial sacrifices

to free ourselves from obstacles to maximizing pleasures of various sorts. After all, we live in a consumer society in which money is not something to be saved, but rather spent in order to make annoyances go away and to purchase gratification and the freedom to pursue it.

Even those of us who ought to know better are somewhat disarmed by neo-liberal ideologists, the Ayn Rand-inspired Alan Greenspans among us. Their desire for an unregulated market echoes our own desire to be free of encumbrances in our individualistic pursuit of pleasure; their belief in an “invisible hand” ensuring that selfishness ends up serving the greater economic good mirrors our own self-justifying rationalizations.

In saying all this I do not wish it to be misunderstood as moralistically justifying or celebrating the restrictions and inhibitions of an earlier era (most of which I personally would find insufferable), or as nostalgic conservatism convinced that the past was superior to the present. I am merely emphasizing the degree to which changes in the nature of the family and relationships have been brought about by and reflect the dynamics of consumer capitalism.

Web: <http://www.yorku.ca/dcarveth>

Email: dcarveth@yorku.ca