

A Word from London

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Beyond Conventional Politics in the Era of the Gesture

In America today prosperity, security, and longevity are regnant. The issues that inspired heated political debate a generation ago are in retreat. All is not well with the world, but in material terms we are not far from it.

But material bliss—wonderful as it is—should not be confused with the triumph of humanism. In fact, if asked the question “what do you want?” most people would respond with platitudes or the request for the unattainable.

That explains in large part why we are in the era of the gesture or what Digby Anderson, editor of *Faking It: Sentimentalization of Modern Society*, calls “fake sentimentality.”

What this period of material bliss has produced is a denial of reality, a refusal to recognize evil, manufactured feelings, utopianism about every dimension of life and the stress on victims.

Reality is now conceived of as images brought to you on television or computer screens. What is actually shown may be filtered several times before reaching an audience. News, for example, is manufactured. Since time has been allotted for news, news there will be whether it is newsworthy or not. That is the reality.

Associated with this brand of “realism” is a refusal to recognize one ubiquitous feature of life: evil. Bad people may be misguided or suffering from an impoverished childhood or were obliged to cope with an abusive father, but they are never evil—irreparably evil—beyond redemption. The newly established view is that everyone can be rehabilitated. Of course that usually flies in the face of reality when some people haven’t been “habilitated.”

Just as evil is denied, feelings are everywhere. “President Clinton feels your pain.” The pundit on TV feels for the poor. The student invariably begins his pontificating with the claim “I feel . . .” Rarely does one think.

Men have been transmogrified from Gary Cooper, who never showed his feelings, into whimpering Woody Allen figures who wear feelings as a hirsute. Unfortunately rarely are these feelings genuine. One cries at a movie and one cries over the death of a friend; it’s the tears that count.

Sensitive to the plight of the downtrodden, the guilty but sensitive person in the era of the gesture, assumes conditions can always be better than they are at the moment. This is the “if only” paradigm. If only we could be nice to one another or if only people could be more compassionate. Here is the contempo-

rary version of utopianism that has transformed the Marxian economic vision into the therapeutic utopia.

While the strides taken in many fields might logically result in gratitude, a natural response to affluence and well-being, it has produced instead a curious disposition for victimhood. America is in fact a nation of victims according to the pontificators in the media.

Some critics lament the fact that the nation craves heroes, but only gets celebrities. It rarely occurs to these critics that you cannot have heroes if we are all victims. The children of affluence are victims of acquisition addiction. The most privileged adopt causes of every conceivable variety in order to advertise victimhood. Politicians who have nothing to say complain of Washington's legislative gridlock. A nation with "contagious" obesity talks endlessly about starvation. And everyone wears a ribbon on his jacket or dress as a gesture of good intentions and as recognition that victimhood surrounds us.

The politics of the gesture is what people seem to crave. Health, safety, comfort, plenty, and peace of mind have produced a moment when human choices have been reduced to pettifogging issues. What matters is the gesture, the appearance of concern, of care, of ameliorating those bruised by society, of addressing the victim.

Concerns emanating from moral exhortation aren't heard. They must be pressed into the cauldron of formulaic media-speak. The end result is sentiment—empty, banal, and discomforting. But in this age in which all voices are heard and every vote counts, this is seemingly what the public wants. Brave New World, here we come.

Derrick Thomas: The Lives He Saved and the Lives He Ignored

Derrick Thomas, the nine time Pro-Bowl player for the Kansas City Chiefs, died of a massive blood clot in February, a little more than two weeks after he was paralyzed in a car accident. There has been an extended period of grieving for the thirty-one-year-old, fallen football hero.

One eulogy after another mentioned Thomas' tireless money raising efforts for a Reading Club that assisted urban kids with reading deficiency and a variety of other charitable causes. He was a posterboy for the United Way and a recipient of the Boy Scouts' Role Model Award, the Sports Illustrated for Kids Good Sport Award, the President George Bush Point of Light Award, NFL Man of the Year Award, the Byron "Whizzer" White Humanitarian Award and the VFW Man of the Year Award.

Pete Morris the Chief's assistant director of public relations, said "You could go on for days telling about the good things he did." When Thomas' body was placed in a tent at Arrowhead Stadium, twenty-three thousand people filed through to pay their last respects.

At another memorial service Chiefs' president Carl Peterson noted that Thomas "tried to be an inspiration to the youth of today who are making the same difficult decisions he had to make fifteen years ago."

What Peterson neglected to point out was what kind of decisions Thomas made in the last fifteen years. He did not point out that Thomas has seven children with five different women, none of whom was his wife. His children live in Miami, Kansas City, and Lawrence, Kansas. In praising Thomas' many charitable acts, the eulogies omitted the personal discipline that should accompany bringing life into the world.

Thomas was a surrogate father to many children, but was not a father to his own children. He spent Christmas handing out gifts to poor kids, but he wasn't around to offer solace for his own kids. Yet this is the man who was given a trunk-load of awards, praised as a man to be emulated.

Some might contend his personal life is no one's business. But they are wrong. Those seven children are somebody's business and they have every right to expect care and concern from their father.

However these are unusual times. In some American sub-cultures there is status in producing babies, even if they aren't nurtured by their fathers. Professional sports has become a haven for such activity. One NBA team of twelve players had thirty-two illegitimate children and that may be closer to the norm than the league office would like to admit.

Yet many sociologists contend absentee fathers may represent the single biggest problem in child adjustment. How can a boy know what it means to be a man if there isn't a man's guidance in the home? It is hardly coincidental that teen boys without fathers gravitate to the senior members of urban gangs. They are in search of the fathers they never had.

In the U.S. at the moment—with the rate of illegitimacy leveling off—two thirds of the black population and one quarter of the total population are born out of wedlock. More than eighty percent of those in prison were born as illegitimate children. This is a national disgrace.

Yet remarkably Derrick Thomas is held up as a model. It is models like Thomas that represent the problem. If elites believe fathering children outside of marriage without responsibility is appropriate, why shouldn't young men searching for ways to assert their manhood adopt the same method? Instead of moral rectitude, elites now offer depravity.

One should commend Derrick Thomas for his play on the field and his charitable gestures off the field. But one should condemn his irresponsible behavior toward the women in his life and the children he brought into this world.

Abercrombie & Fitch's Profit May Be Teenager's Despair

For retailers worldwide there is an obvious sales maxim: sex sells. Wherever there are teenagers able to influence a market, retailers capitalize on the hormones coruscating through teenage bodies. This isn't a new pitch, but in some sense it has become different from the recent past.

There was a time not so long ago when the pitch was well understood, but subtle. Clean teeth increase sex appeal; buying x as opposed to, drives young girls to apoplexy. Starting several years ago with Calvin Klein underwear ads, the sales

pitch changed from the somewhat subtle “connect the dots approach” to the blatant display of sexual arousal—“pushing the envelope” note the advertisers.

Of course this is only one dimension of culture in which the envelope has been pushed to an extreme, but it is a new condition that bears analysis.

Abercrombie and Fitch (A&F) was a company known for preppie, understated garments for much of its history. In the eighties the company went through a difficult period when those with traditional taste turned elsewhere for adornment. At the point of bankruptcy, A&F transformed itself. From the preppie, Ivy League look which represented its sales base, it became the sexy, vanguardish company in search of teenagers.

It found that market in spades. So popular is the company today that L.F.O. in their song “Summer Girls” sing “I like girls that wear Abercrombie & Fitch, I’ll take her if I had one wish.” The A&F catalogue with models in various stages of undress, is now sold and has become a revenue producer for the company. A&F, with its sexually explicit advertising, is among the hottest retailers in the country.

Several consumer groups have challenged the “Naughty or Nice” catalogue, but the criticism has been brushed off by company spokesmen who insist the advertising is aimed at a college audience, not minors. Of course this claim is at least partially disingenuous since company officials know that teens are the age group driving the success of A&F and teens regard it as among the “coolest brands” in the nation.

Critics contend—appropriately in my judgment—that A&F advertising is part and parcel of a barrage of sexual messages aimed at teenagers. These include every manifestation of so-called culture from film and rap music to clothing.

Fearful that the criticism might influence sales, A&F did recall its summer catalogue and apologized publicly to those who were offended. The company also has agreed to a minimum age requirement (eighteen) for the purchase of the catalogue.

It is interesting to note, however, that the negative publicity hasn’t adversely affected sales. In fact, after the summer catalogue was recalled paid circulation soared and the catalogue became a collector’s item. It would appear that the desire to experience sex vicariously has not gone out of fashion among teenagers.

But there is a point overlooked in this advertising blitz: The overt display of sex is influencing behavior. Sex is engaged in at an earlier age than ever before. Teenage pregnancies may be down slightly, but that is due in large part to contraceptives. By any measure teenage sexual promiscuity is increasing.

Sex as intimacy, as a prelude to marriage and a lasting relationship, is being converted into an item of clothing—worn today and discarded tomorrow. Meaning and feeling are foreign concepts relegated to the anachronistic sentiments of yesteryear.

Is it any wonder then that men and women in their twenties are “burned out,” blasé about any form of intimacy? Women often feel used, caught on the horns of a dilemma in which popularity and self-consciousness are in a continuing struggle.

As I see it A&F advertising is not innocent; it is a function of a marketplace

so entranced with sales that it has lost sight of public responsibility. Taking advantage of teenage propensities is not a new condition, nor is A&F alone in this appeal. But the obvious exploitation of youngsters through explicitly provocative ads is contemptible whoever the retailer may be.

In some respects, these ads reinforce and confirm the arguments adopted by prime-time television viewing where sexual expression is invariably good, lasting relationships are unnecessary and anyone who opposes sentiments in the *zeitgeist* is uptight. From the programs to the ads sex is sold.

An extraterrestrial examining this condition would have to assume that sex at the moment is a commodity like soap. In an effort to sell ideas and products to viewing audiences sex is continually used. A&F may be on the road to financial success as a result of its sexy image, but it is also taking teenagers down a road of despair and disappointment. This is an enormous price to pay for profit.

Gender Issues in the Marketplace

For the radicals of the sixties and seventies sexual predilections were considered cultural impositions, an artifice attached to gender. A girl's preference for dolls and a boy's for fire trucks were deemed a manifestation of social decisions and therefore malleable.

But after two decades of "gender neutral" toys and the careful avoidance of stereotyping, marketers have come to the "retrograde" decision that gender differences are here to stay and may be more a function of nature rather than nurture.

Toys "R" Us has recently decided to have an area for girls "Girl's World," where dolls, kitchen toys and make-up are stocked on magenta shelves and a "Boy's World" with action figures, Tonka trucks and walkie-talkies. Yes, the 1950s are in vogue again, at least when it comes to toys.

Buying patterns are proving that the resistance to gender selling once characterized by so-called liberated radicals has largely evanesced.

Fox Family Channels and Saban Entertainment Inc. are engaged in a joint venture for gender based marketing. The new unit is about to start two new digital cable networks—one for boys and one for girls.

Rich Cronin, Fox Family Channels' president said,

We have come a long way from the 60s and 70s when everyone said boys and girls are the same, their tastes are the same, their entertainment should be the same.

Behind the shift in attitude is what I would call the "reality principle." Those parents who believed in gender malleability finally came up against the brick wall of child's play decisions. No matter how many times enlightened moms gave Johnny a doll to play with, he preferred Power Rangers. Even the most rigidly feminist moms are obliged to deal with reality at some point.

Child development experts still contend that sex roles are related to socialization, merely earlier socialization than was once the case. They simply cannot allow

that genetic endowment is immutable.

But software marketers understand this matter better than the psychologists. Blizzard Entertainment is appealing to boys with Starcraft, an outer-space game, while Encore Software Inc. is selling Girls Only! Secret Diary and more.

Needless to say, there are still leftovers from the overheated sixties who are offended by this marketing approach. But as buying patterns indicate they don't matter very much. Patricia Haag, director of research at the American Association of University Women's Education foundation, calls this condition "anachronistic." It may well be that Ms. Haag is the anachronism.

While some women's groups have protested against the "sexual segregation," average moms and dads find this a perfectly reasonable way to buy toys for their children. A Toys "R" Us spokesman said this company's policy emanated from exhaustive research into customer buying preferences. He notes it is not coincidental that Easy Bake Ovens are located near Barbie dolls and not next to G.I. Joe. "It's not our job to create what kids want and to push them one way or another," he notes.

Alas, that is precisely what radicals of yesteryear want to do. They are intent on restructuring society even if it flies in the face of common sense. Their goal was to create gender confusion, an anomalous situation in which girls would be more masculine and boys more feminine.

That it didn't work is hardly surprising. How could it work when it defies biology? Perhaps the day is coming when geneticists will create the truly androgynous person, but until that moment arrives marketers would be wise to separate male and female products. That is what consumer taste prefers. And that is consistent with what nature dictates.

Mattel Inc. is soon to launch a make-over for its star brand Barbie doll. Consistent with the growing emphasis on femininity, Barbie will appeal to "girl power." I'm merely guessing, of course, but look for a rise in Mattel sales. The company is listening to its consumers.

The War Against Biotech

Activists, plaintiffs attorneys and the radical scientific community have found a new target: food made from genetically modified crops.

Benny Haerlin, international coordinator for Greenpeace in Berlin, is credited with directing a campaign in Europe that has major companies scared and consumers scrambling to find products that aren't genetically engineered.

With public opposition already galvanized, Greenpeace has easy pickings ahead. But the issue isn't the evocation of fear, but evidence which indicates transplanted genes are hazardous to your health. On this score, Greenpeace offers very little.

In fact, Greenpeace concedes that "risks are unknown." However, spokesmen for the organization contend the biotech industry is treating people like guinea pigs by failing to conduct long-term studies before products are marketed.

This claim, of course, isn't true if by long-term one means years, not decades. Half of the American soybean crop and a third of the corn crop contain transplanted

genes. These products are in turn used in countless products from Coke, to hamburger buns, ketchup and cake mixes.

There isn't a scintilla of evidence to assert that Americans, already health conscious, have been put at risk due to the consumption of genetically altered products. On the contrary, by consuming more fruits and vegetables that are made possible through genetic modification, Americans are living healthier lives than ever before.

However, even the possibility of a health or environmental issue awakens the passions of attorneys who see dollar signs dancing in their imagination. Already supermarkets and restaurants advertise nongenetically manipulated products. And the campaign has only started.

The fact that biotech has reduced pesticide use, soil erosion, water pollution, not to mention producing a dramatic increase in yield, has gone virtually unnoticed. A new bad guy to replace tobacco companies has been manufactured.

Overlooked in the hysteria over genetically modified products is that genes combine and recombine naturally without the assistance of lab technicians. Nonetheless the heat is on.

Novartis' Gerber division said it would eliminate genetically modified ingredients from its baby food. H. J. Heinz Co. is taking similar steps. Apparently the big companies facing the shadow of expensive law suits would rather concede than fight.

Moreover, since biotech is largely an American phenomenon, the activists have combined a Luddite agenda with anti-American sentiment. One activist compared genetically altered crops to British colonial rule in India. Another contends that "the problems of the entire world have been created in the U.S., so we have to bring these issues back home."

Yet what the radical agenda does is adversely affect the very people it is designed to protect. Biotech has produced a Green Revolution that has generated more food for more people than the world has ever known. It has also relieved health problems and improved the standard of living for millions of farmers. Surely these achievements should count for something.

This is not the case with the ideologically driven environmentalists who have arrogated to themselves the role of global caretaker. At times it appears as if they are also the global extortionists.

Generating fear in the age of instant communication is easy. What is not so easy is creating a balanced perspective on scientific innovation. As long as the radicals have center stage, it will be increasingly difficult to distinguish between a genuine threat to the environment and human welfare. That remains a great challenge for all fair-minded people. Ω