

Does the free market corrode moral character?



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Yes, too often.

Critics rightfully grasp that the free market undermines the traditional, local arrangements that people depend on to teach and sustain morality. Consider especially the experience of children. They first learn morality from their families, with whom they are most

emotionally bonded. Love attaches children to moral conventions and arouses essential moral emotions like sympathy and guilt. In a preindustrial society, these moral habits are further reinforced by the tribe or the village, as well as by religious institutions and folk tales. The developing child is surrounded by a kind of conspiracy of moral teachers, demonstrating lessons of character by word and (less reliably) by deed.

Market economies weaken this cultural conspiracy in three powerful ways. First, they introduce novelty, which challenges established cultural habits and moral verities. Second, they stir up individual desire in ways that can easily weaken the self-discipline and moral obligations that make free markets flourish. (As the sociologist Daniel Bell famously argued, markets can end up cannibalizing their own moral infrastructure.) And third, as they advance, market economies become more likely to treat the yet-to-be-socialized child as an autonomous, adult-like actor rather than as an immature dependent. They often turn the pliant student of moral obligations into a skeptical, even resistant peer.

Two of the most influential new products of the 20th century, the automobile and the television, perfectly illustrate the market's potential to dilute moral consensus and personal loyalties. By exporting insiders and importing outsiders, the car reduced the sway of the local community and its moral requirements. By taking fathers to jobs

far from home, it accelerated the separation of work from family life. Indeed, market evolution was the direct cause of the "separate spheres" that placed mothers at the helm of domestic life and fathers at a distant workplace.

The car also scattered family members (uncles and aunts to California, grandparents to Florida) who previously might have buttressed the child's developing moral sense. It increased opportunities for anonymity, which made it easier to escape shame and embarrassment over violations of moral behavior, and allowed individuals, especially teenagers, to avoid the judgmental eyes of adults. In the early 20th century, a juvenile court judge, noting the unexpected use to which young people were putting the new invention, grumbled that the horseless carriage was nothing more than a "brothel on wheels."

The cultural disruption wrought by television, and particularly by advertising, has been even more troubling than that of the car. Before the advent of the small screen, families could expect to do most of their moralizing work safe from commercial intrusions. Family life could be imagined as a "haven in a heartless world," in the words of the sociologist Christopher Lasch. Salesmen may have come to River City, but they had to knock on doors and ply their band uniforms and instruments to domestic gatekeepers, usually mothers. Television allowed the salesmen to push past parents and sit down right next to the unmoralized child, tempting him with pleasures against which he had few defenses. More generally, television uses fantasies of revenge, violent mayhem, sexual license, and material excess to lure viewers, young and old.

Of course, today the Internet is usurping television's long-held status as the chief sponsor of hedonism, materialism, and anarchic egotism. If broadcast television had censors who clumsily expressed a cultural consensus about acceptable public speech, the World Wide Web knows no bounds. Moreover, just as the automobile gave

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provincial people new opportunities for anonymity, the Internet allows children to escape the limitations of their status. Nothing better symbolizes the market's penchant for turning the child into a pseudo-adult, for undermining parental authority, and for fostering shame-escaping anonymity, than the 13-year-old girl arranging a rendezvous with a 40-year-old man on an Internet chat room while her parents assume she is doing her homework.

But all the news is not bad. Even though the market has undermined the power of community norms and loaded sole responsibility for moral teaching onto the shoulders of individual parents, all the while bombarding kids with the likes of *Grand Theft Auto* and Paris Hilton, it has yet to bring us Gomorrah. In the United States, indicators of juvenile moral health, like rates of violence and promiscuity and rebellious attitudes toward adults, have declined in recent decades even as the electronic media have increased the market's reach.

Why? One reason is that middle-class parents have reacted to the market's siren calls by intensifying their watchfulness. Their efforts have sometimes been ridiculed, and for good reason. But hyper-parenting is an understandable response to the dislocations that come with free-market innovation and actually attests to the resilience, at least among the middle class, of the bourgeois family, which evolved in response to capitalism. In communities where mothers have gone to work, extended families have moved away, and strangers and cars roam, parents continue to supervise their children through the use of cell phones, extracurricular programs, surrogates like tutors and coaches, and, alas, Internet spying programs and even GPS devices.

The relative moral health of the young has also been bolstered, it must be said, by the free market's relentless encouragement of self-discipline. To succeed in today's knowledge economy, young people understand that they must excel at school. Despite the temptations of consumerism, middle-class and aspiring immigrant children grow up knowing that education is crucial to maintaining or improving their status and that competition in the knowledge economy is keen. In an earlier day, children imbued with the Protestant ethic did their chores and minded their p's and q's. Today's kids go to cram schools and carry 40-pound backpacks.

So does this mean that critics of the market have been proved wrong? Not exactly. The free market's celebration of hedonism and autonomy has had its predicted effect on those with less cultural capital — the poor and, more recently, the working class. In low-income communities, the assault on norms of self-restraint and fidelity in personal relations has undermined both the extended and the nuclear family. In many such communities, divorce and out-of-wedlock births are becoming the norm. The work of moralizing the next generation in an advanced market economy is difficult under the best conditions. For single mothers in low-income communities, where schools are chaotic and responsible males are few and far between, it may be close to impossible.

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