SELLING US AN HORIZON
of Insignificance

BY Tracy Summerville

THERE SEEMS TO BE A GROWING TREND IN TELEVISION COMMERCIALS WHEREBY ADVERTISERS ARE ATTEMPTING TO SELL THEIR PRODUCTS BY CLAIMING THAT THEY ARE FAMILY. BRAND LOYALTY HAS GONE BEYOND GOOD SERVICE AND A GOOD PRODUCT; IT SEEMS NOW THAT WE CAN RELY ON COMPANIES TO HELP US WHEN WE ARE LONELY OR WHEN WE NEED A RIDE FROM THE HOSPITAL. THIS TREND IS DISTURBING NOT JUST BECAUSE IT REPRESENTS A COMMODIFICATION OF THE FAMILY BUT BECAUSE IT MIGHT REPRESENT A GROWING TREND TO ATOMISM AND A DECLINE IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

In his book, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, Edward Banfield noted that the "backwardness" of a single village in southern Italy was to be explained by "the inability of villagers to act together for their common good or, indeed, for any end transcending the immediate material interest of the nuclear family." He describes the inability to act together in any concerted way beyond the nuclear family as "amoral familism." Banfield argues that characteristics of amoral familism may appear in other societies and that only those exhibiting all the characteristics of amoral familism should be described this way. Yet Banfield's characterization of the society without civic virtue may help us to describe the malaise of contemporary society and the growing trend for advertisers to fill the void by selling us "the family."

This paper will argue that the "malaise of modernity," as described by Charles Taylor, is exemplified by the commodification of the family and the rise of "amoral familism." Further it will suggest that advertisers are filling the void left by the "neutral liberal state." In keeping with the scholarship on civic engagement by authors such as Robert Putnam, this piece will show that the narrow horizon offered by "the family" is insufficient and insignificant for the development of civic engagement.

The three elements of the modern identity have become entwined or rather institutionalized in the structures of economic and political life. The three primary "goods" are themselves the structure in which capitalism can thrive.

"THE MALAISE OF MODERNITY"

Charles Taylor describes the malaise of modernity this way. The modern identity requires liberty, nature and efficacy. Our modern identity has been framed around these three primary "goods." Liberty is the capacity to express autonomous ways of being. This conception of liberty is the antithesis to the idea that man's place on earth is preordained by a cosmological order. It is, in fact, the separation of man from nature and the capacity to reason that gives agency to autonomous ways of being, including the choice to be governed through structures designed by one's own consent. In the modern conception of identity, nature is then the recognition of what the self needs to attain authenticity. Liberty provides the freedom to self-actualize but what is in one's nature provides the inspiration. Efficacy might be described as the capacity to legitimately self-express and to receive acknowledgement, tacit or implicit, for one's self-expression.

The modern identity developed in a very particular setting. It arose in (and through) the industrial revolution and the birth of modern capitalism. The three elements of the modern identity have become entwined or rather institutionalized in the structures of economic and political life. The three primary "goods" are themselves the structure in which capitalism can thrive. The Protestant work ethic turns these characteristics into an ethos of the good life. But as secular individuals we are "producers, in the broadest sense, we belong to a whole interconnected society of labour and technology which has immense efficacy in transforming nature and produces more astonishing wonders every day ... We can think of it as partly ours, as a confirmation of ourselves" (Taylor 74).

Of course neither work nor citizenship really give the sense of fulfillment that authenticity requires and so Taylor says we look back to the Romantic conception of nature to find some of the less reasoned, more "passioned" elements of our human nature in which to find real fulfillment. It is, in fact, in our recreation time that we explore our substantive natures.

The malaise of contemporary times arises when our liberty, our nature and our efficacy become entangled in a paradox of their own invention. Liberty becomes anomie, nature becomes recreation"alized" and efficacy turns to alienation and ineffectuality. Taylor describes a series of features of contemporary society which tend to undermine our confidence in it as moderns (Taylor 77): alienation at work, lack of control over priorities, the fetishization of commodities.

It is easy to characterize "alienation at work" with a description of an individual on a factory assembly line putting the same component into the same slot over and over all day long. A kind of description like this one, Taylor says, treads on Marx's domain but Taylor makes an important clarification. He points out that contemporary workers under capitalism enjoy "profoundly modified" working conditions compared to their early industrial counterparts. And those "modified" working conditions speak to our need for liberty and efficacy. It is not just that the conditions of employment have improved but the power to control the direction of one's work day and to participate in a creative manner have given rise to a greater sense of control that many individuals have over their work experience.

There is a sense, even with this move to "modify" the workplace experience that this too suffers from "hypertrophy" of its own success. There is a profound cultural shift that is taking place in society that is saying that despite the new found freedom in the workplace, there is a deep need to find something other than work to fulfill our quest for authenticity. While technology was supposed to help free us from the stationary life and drudgery of the workplace setting, the office could now follow us wherever we wanted to go. For a while television advertising spoke to this. We saw individuals driving rugged SUVs up the side of mountains in order to find a quite place to sit back with their laptop. For a while this kind of "freedom" was enough but recently there has been a growing shift that makes technology the enemy of "freedom."

There is a profound cultural shift that is taking place in society that is saying that despite the new found freedom in the workplace, there is a deep need to find something other than work to fulfill our quest for authenticity.

"THE SPIRITUAL WALKABOUT"

There has been, it seems, a profound response to this need to find something other than work that will make living worthwhile. Peter Emberley, in his new book, *Divine Hunger: Canadians on Spiritual Walkabout*, argues Canadians, while claiming the need for a spiritual experience are unwilling to commit to a particular religion because the "institutionalized" aspects of religion are, in fact, counter to liberty, efficacy and nature (the modern liberal identity). The modern identity Taylor describes is part of the great tradition of Western liberal thought in which institutions are created by one's own consent and will. "Institutionalized religions," particularly Western religions, are too steeped in tradition, too connected to a hierarchy of spiritual experience where "the church" plays the role of intermediary, to give the individual the feeling that their experience will be unique and "liberating." Robert Putnam argues that the Church creates vertical relationships, "linking unequal agents in asymmetric relations of hierarchy and dependence" (Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, 173). It makes sense then that Emberley's study shows that Canadians are being drawn to Eastern religions because they cut out the middle man in the spiritual relationship.

Emberley points to the phenomenal success of *The Celestine Prophesy: An Adventure* (Emberley, 153). Others have been successful too. Oprah Winfrey's television show, web site and magazine have managed to commodify and sell back to a lonely society the fad of the spiritual walkabout. The television show acts as a forum for "public therapy." The central theme of all shows is about the need to find one's inner peace. The magazine offers pull out bookmarks with enlightening sayings about improving oneself, and one's relationships and the world in general. But more than this, the phenomenon of Oprah is the creation of a kind of television family without the kinship ties. It is in fact nationalism as described by Benedict Anderson, a sense of connection with people one will never come to know (*Imagined Communities*, 6). It is an imagined community but instead of being created out of civics by and with the state, it is being packaged and sold by a television production company.

What is driving this need for spiritual reawaking? Taylor would argue that modern liberalism has created a sense of anomie and alienation, not only from self but also from other.

What is driving this need for spiritual reawaking? Taylor would argue that modern liberalism has created a sense of anomie and alienation, not only from self but also from other. Putnam too would point to the decline of civic engagement that stems from a loss of participation in activities that brings individuals together in "horizontal" relationships. His idea is that we need to participate in clubs and sports and choral groups etc. in order to interact with individuals of like interest but also to create community ties that are necessary for positive civic engagement.

The paradox is that individuals are looking for a sense of completeness in absence of something greater than themselves while at the same time rejecting anything greater than themselves.

SO WHAT IS AN HORIZON OF SIGNIFICANCE?

It is interesting to note that both Taylor and Putnam use the term "horizon" in their argument, Taylor in the phrase "horizon of meaning / significance" and Putnam in the "horizon–tal" relationships. This is not surprising, although it took an astute colleague to point this out to me, since both of their arguments rely on similar ideas. Taylor's idea of an horizon of significance appears in a number of his works including, *Sources of the Self, The Ethics of Authenticity* and his essay, "Alternative Futures." It has been summarized this way:

> *[a]ccording to Taylor, the rise of individualism grew out of an ideal of authenticity which can be traced back to Rousseau and Herder and which originally embodied the ideal of a higher life, premised on the possibility of a distinction between what we actually desire and what we ought to desire. But over time,...this evaluative element disappeared and the ideal of authenticity was corrupted: the notion of an external standard which we should strive to live up to was replaced by the self-confirming, vacuous idea of choice as a good in itself (David McCabe, "Taylor's significant horizons." Commonweal. February 12, 1993:19-21).*

Taylor's argument is that choice will be vacuous unless one has some measure against which a choice is made; something which actually gives the choice meaning. This can exist in what Taylor calls a "dialogical" society. In such a society, civic discourse begins with a "presumption of equal worth" of ideas or cultural practices and through dialogue one is to be able to assess the ideas or practices.

The horizon of significance is created in and amongst the individuals living in a society where civic virtue and liberty are connected. And this leads us to what Putnam is saying when he describes horizontal relationships (David McCabe, "Taylor's significant horizons." Commonweal. February 12, 1993:21).

AN HORIZON OF SIGNIFICANCE: INSTRUMENTAL OR SUBSTANTIVE

In Putnam's study, *Making Democracy Work*, he argues that civic engagement in Northern Italy is significantly increased because individuals are connected in a real community. He describes a web of "horizontal relationships" that create a sense of belonging in which individuals make choices about the way they act based on a kind of a

rational assessment of their moral obligations to the individuals with whom they "play." Putnam uses tradition models of game theory (the tragedy of the commons, the public good, the logic of collective action and the prisoner's dilemma) to help the reader understand the dilemma of rational choice: "defecting" is a more rational choice than acting for the greater good. So Putnam argues that,

> *success in overcoming dilemmas of collective action and the self-defeating opportunism that they spawn depends on the broader social context within which any particular game is played. Voluntary cooperation is easier in a community that has inherited a substantial stock of social capital in the form of norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement (Putnam, 167).*

In other words, a rational decision to act for the public good is more likely if the individual feels that there will be substantial punishment, even if only in the form of social ostracism. Putnam then goes on to show that the horizontal social networks help to create an atmosphere in which civic responsibility is fostered.

Without in any way detracting from Putnam's findings, there may be a better way to explain the context in which decisions about providing for the public good are made. The problem is the starting point or the analogy that is used to help us understand the decision making process for acting for the common good. Putnam is talking about individuals who make decisions to act in the public good because there is an intuit trust that is developed between individuals about "expectations" for behaviour. He uses the example of raking leaves. We do this, he argues, not just because we want a green lawn but because there is a social expectation that we will not let our leaves blow onto someone else's lawn for them to clean up. There is also a social expectation that we should keep neatly trimmed and raked lawns because this enhances the beauty of the neighbourhood. There is a moral element here in the expectation of a public "good." In the case of the prisoner's dilemma, which is the main example that Putnam uses to explain rational choice, two individuals have



committed a crime and they are now counting on one another to cooperate to generate an outcome favourable to both. But this example is morally baseless and completely lacks a sense of community that can provide an "horizon of significance;" that is a moral base upon which decisions about action are made.

One might argue that individuals choose to act egoistically or altruistically but both of these ways of acting assert the individual as the agent. In other words, I act for my own good or I act for the greater good because it makes me feel good or creates an instrumental or utilitarian outcome; i.e. that you will conduct business with me. But this is not what Putnam means. I think he wants to say that one acts because there is a moral expectation to do so; the individual is situated in a "network" but the network is not just instrumental it is substantive. The significant horizon is not of individual creation (which is normally an expectation of modern liberalism); it is the moral base that exists as a result of the expectations of the community.

The point of all of this is that civic engagement increases when individuals know what is expected of them within the community. Putnam, of course, argues that we are less engaged in these community activities than in the past and the decline of civic engagement is a result of the decline of the horizontal networks in which we become accustomed to the norms, social behaviours and, I will go so far as to say morals, of our community.

A sense of anomie and individualism, the rejection of vertical networks (like the Church) and horizontal networks (like bowling clubs and choral groups) means that we pursue our authenticity in solitary pursuits, like the "spiritual walkabouts" that were discussed earlier. But the paradox is that individuals are looking for a sense of completeness in absence of something greater than themselves while at the same time rejecting anything greater than themselves.

It is becoming more and more commonplace that companies are trying to fill the void that is left by the modern malaise

This trend corresponds to the rise of neo-liberalism wherein the state is less inclined to promote civic engagement. The rise of the right-wing around the world and in Canada has created an atmosphere in which the welfare state is anathema to liberty. In this context the contemporary state needs to be seen as "downsizing," as not pandering to welfare recipients, as cutting taxes. The "institution" that is the state no longer has any mandate to create some kind of "horizon of significance." Some may argue that liberal states never had that mandate but there are two arguments against this. First, the post World War I ideology of reform liberalism certainly

did shift greater responsibility onto the state to provide, at least in part, a kindler, gentler capitalism. Second, in the case of Canada, the Red-Tory conservative tradition contributed to a context in which the state could and did attempt to provide (what one could again call) a kindler, gentler and most importantly, substantive community. But this is no longer true. And it is in this context that the disturbing trend in television advertising is taking place.

SELLING US AN HORIZON OF INSIGNIFICANCE

It is becoming more and more commonplace that companies are trying to fill the void that is left by the modern malaise. Although I think there are numerous examples of this, I will focus on two trends: one is that companies are trying to respond to the feeling of anomie by commodifying the family. Second, many advertisers are picking up on the trend of the "spiritual walkabout" and they are commodifying the "solitary" journey toward self-actualization. What I will argue over this last section of the paper is that this is worrisome because neither of these situations promotes civic engagement: the relationship between consumers and producers is merely instrumental.

In the first case, we have seen the commodification of the family illustrated in the advertising campaigns of the Saturn Car Company. Their marketing strategy seems to market their dealers even before their product. One of their advertisements tells the story of a woman who breaks her arm and calls her Saturn dealer to come and get her from the hospital. The woman nurses her aching arm while leaning against a window in which we see reflected the pouring rain. The tag line was something to the effect that she could not think of anyone better to call than her Saturn dealer because "he's family." Tim Hortons has picked up on this trend also. An elderly woman climbs a steep, rural road. She does this everyday in order to see the girls at the store who are "family." In fact their web site boasts,

> *The Tim Hortons chain is part of people's lives and lifestyles. To our customers, Tim Hortons is their neighborhood meeting place – a home away from home (http://www.timhortons.com/english/english.html).*

The point is that what is drawing these individuals together is that they all purchased the same type of automobile or the same brand of coffee and donuts. One might grant that there might be more camaraderie created at a local restaurant than at the local car dealership but the issue is that in both cases the companies are not really selling their product they are selling us the idea that they are family. The elderly woman went to Tim Hortons to see the sales staff not to meet a group of her own friends.

One might grant that there might be more camaraderie created at a local restaurant than at the local car dealership but the issue is that in both cases the companies are not really selling their product they are selling us the idea that they are family.

Family might be an institution that we still trust: it has both elements of a "vertical relationship" and a "horizontal relationship." In fact, Taylor implicitly says that the modern family is a source of horizontal relationships. He says,

> *...the version of the modern identity predominant in our society is one that aims towards a mobile subject who loosens the ties of larger communities and finds himself on his own in the nuclear family. But this gives a tremendously heightened significance to the nuclear family, which is now the main locus of strong, lasting, defining relations, and it has given family life and the emotions of family love a uniquely important place in the modern conception of natural fulfillment... (Charles Taylor, "Alternative Futures," 82).*

But those horizontal relationships are not sufficient to create a dialogue beyond the narrow scope of the ties of kinship. They are not plural enough. The family does not provide a significant base upon which to build civic engagement or social capital. And again, Taylor points to this when he says that the horizontal demands of the family put great stress on marriage because both of the partners are trying to self-actualize and when either of the partners feels constrained by the relationship i.e. when their liberty is constrained, the relationship can "[feel like] a prison rather than a locus of identity." The issue of amoral familism is that the individuals: "maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family; [and] assume that all others will do likewise" (Banfield, 85). This connects with the second trend in advertising and that is that advertisers support the individual journey toward self-actualization.

Advertisers have picked up on the notion, as described earlier, that technology can be the enemy of liberty: individuals are throwing cell phones off mountains or just shutting them off as testimony to freedom. Richard Reeves ("We Bowl Alone, But Work Together" *New Statesman* Vol. 130 Issue 4531: 23) has argued that Putnam does not take into account the workplace as a place that creates important horizontal networks. But even if Putnam missed this, it seems that now individuals are rebelling against the workplace. They are choosing to "shut off" the work connection in order to look for something more fulfilling.

What we come to is that there are neither the significant horizontal networks nor the state driven ideology of reform liberalism to create a context for civic engagement. Neo-liberalism wins when advertisers try to fill the gap left by the malaise of modernity with a purely instrumental kind of relationship. What they are selling us is an horizon of insignificance.

Dr. Tracy Summerville is an Assistant Professor at The University of Northern British Columbia