
EDITORIAL



Follow the Subject and You'll Find the Money

Toby Miller

The ideology of civil society is founded on the liberal individual, but not just in the guise of the sovereign consumer who deploys means-ends rationality to maximize his or her use. For that craven figure ultimately dies alone, surrounded by rotting goods and spent services: anomie is the fate of such isolates, in the truly lonely hour of the last instance. To avoid such an end, the liberal individual must also learn sociability and collaboration. In our media-thick era, this desire for a double-sided subject has produced a litany of binary judgments: solo TV viewing bad, team bowling good; gambling online bad, church attendance good.

In early 2000, 55 percent of the U.S. population was estimated to have access to the internet—by far the highest absolute numbers of any country in the world. But depression and loneliness were disproportionately represented among these denizens of the internet, so much so that U.S. cultural critics, functionalist sociologists, and media mavens are concerned that the liberal individual has become unbalanced by it, with the selfish utilitarian outweighing the pro-social volunteer. Put another way, the corollary of the internet's spread across the nation is said to be the rise of solitude and a diminution in social activity—the loss, in short, of civil society. Again, the litany of binary judgments applies: less time shopping in stores, but also less time spent with the family; more time in the house, but more of that time working (Markoff 2000, A1). The other side to these numbers is that e-mail, not Web purchase or other financial transactions, is dominant—just 25 percent of users buy online and less than 10 percent bank that way, accounting for expenditure of almost \$15 billion in 1999 (Markoff 2000, A18; Vogel and Druckerman 2000). Such figures suggest that the internet is



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a source of sociality, not its scourge. But let's not bother the mavens with such facts.

This anxiety over how private life is being transformed (not, we are told, by shifts in the structure of capitalism, just by the innately freewheeling logic of this technology and its double-edged force of freedom and responsibility—in case you wondered) is a luxury open to few. Just as most of us in the world do not eat meat, so the vast majority (80 percent) have never made a telephone call, let alone logged on. Across Africa, only Zimbabwe, Egypt, and South Africa have internet services in each major city. One million of the continent's 900 million people are online (Everard 2000, 29, 33).

So what relevance does the liberal individual have for such contexts? Simple. This individual is taken as a model for economic and social policy throughout the world. Economic models are based on the desire to maximize use in a selfish way—the consumer as a desiring machine. Social models are based on the preparedness to think beyond oneself, to contribute to social cohesiveness via forms of voluntary association that sidestep the pitfalls of both business and government.

The anomic subject of the North may be lost in a world of consumption and not involved in enough volunteerism to keep the domestic underclass out of the welfare rolls, but is nevertheless a good-object model for development economists in their prescriptions for the Third World: away from import substitution industrialization (ISI) and toward export-oriented industrialization (EOI). The various theorists and agencies of development have rejected their 1960s faith that Third World countries could develop economically by mirroring the primary, secondary, and tertiary industries of the North, via ISI. Now, the plan is to identify industries where these nations have a potential competitive edge in the global market through such factor endowments as natural resources, capital formation, or knowledge, emphasizing EOI. So where the World Bank once concentrated on modernizing civil services and supporting new investment, today it takes competition and corporate participation as its lodestone—don't give money to the people's representatives, hand it to their bosses (Nulens and Van Audenhove 1999, 458-59).

This focus on actually existing factor endowments will supposedly enable Third World countries to catch the eye of entrepreneurial industrialists (who in turn are looking for comparative advantage) to deliver a product to our equally rational subject, the liberal individual hunkered down in front of the computer screen. Each phase of calculation and transaction is, therefore, modeled on the putatively innate proclivity of economic "man" to maximize use.

How does this relate to the internet and to models of civil society? Telecommunications across the globe have long been a complex ISI amalgam of private and public investment and management, as states with large

populations have sought to balance national security and delivery of services to their populations with the desire for cost-effectiveness. But relevant international lending and aid organizations and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) have moved into an EOI era of structural adjustment, in keeping with the prevailing neoliberal "Washington Consensus" of economic management (aka pressure from U.S. business interests). While the World Bank trots out shibboleths about the need for nationally specific telecom strategies, it will not budge on two meta-policies that trump all others: commodification and competition, based on a borderless model of corporate control. Such significantly different economies and politics as Thailand, Vietnam, and India are increasingly "encouraged" to select multinational corporations to establish their internet systems. The idea of wealthy urban users subsidizing other areas is scotched. So Bangalore may be a central site for world computer work, but many rural regions of South Asia have no telephone service (Everard 2000, 40; Nulens and Van Audenhove 1999, 459, 463).

In concert with the World Bank and the ITU, the United Nations' Economic Commission for Africa adopted an African Information Society Initiative (AISI) in 1996. AISI envisages a continental network founded on classical liberal principles: the rule of law and laissez-faire internationalist principles of investment (cut your tariffs and we'll come visit!). Out of this will flow the magic elixir of development: a globally competitive yet supposedly self-reliant population of liberal individuals. Right, now just clarify something for me: will that be like the Green Revolution, or Project Camelot, or dam building, or population control? Name your "triumph" of Western-exported modeling.

There can be no doubt that these policies, both across economies and specifically in the communications industries, have helped create and/or sustain capitalist classes. The corporate world, within and outside Third World countries, adores nations with a nascent or fully formed bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie. So we read that Internet Gratis signed up 450,000 Brazilian subscribers in the first four weeks of the new century (every 2.5 seconds at one point) as if this signaled open access to the entire population.¹ The 95 percent of Latin Americans without access are virtually absent from this discourse, other than in their putative role as consumers (Helft 2000; Vogel and Druckerman 2000).

And what happens to civil society in the Third World, that socially responsible analog to our friend in front of the screen back in the United States? It is left in the hands of the newly fetishized buffers between state, religion, population, and media: nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the prescription for third-sector change that can magically mediate between citizen, government, and corporation. The United States has 2

million such institutions, almost all of them formed since 1970. Russia has gained 650,000 since the end of state socialism and Kenya births 240 a year.

Most NGOs associated with aid are effectively regranteeing institutions that use state moneys in ways designed to avoid accusations of neocolonialism from the Left and governmental waste from the Right. So the United States gives U.S.\$700 million annually to Africa through surrogates, and Médecins Sans Frontières derives half its budget from state agencies. Everybody benefits by this neat sleight of hand. Or do they? Some bodies become captive of their real funders—so Congress' taste for good Christian souls holding the purse strings has led to the neologism RINGOs (religious NGOs), symbiotic relations with governments produce GRINGOs (governmental NGOs), and corporate self-modeling offers BINGOs (business NGOs) ("Sins of the Secular Missionaries" 2000). No wonder the World Bank's claim that NGOs guarantee a mixed-internet model for the Third World reads so spuriously (Nulens and Van Audenhove 1999, 459).

I don't have an answer to these dilemmas. But I do know that the Left can heed an important lesson from them. The precept of the liberal subject, as both sovereign consumer and civil-society participant, has real material impact, regardless of its respectively selfish and folksy reputations. That liberal subject is a crucial target if we are to win the debate over the allocation of resources in this area. So let's spend some time interrogating the anomic U.S. figure staring out at the screen, pondering where to go today. Such travel is at some cost—to others.

Note

1. The other, xenophobic, side to this boom is U.S. anxiety that Latin America may again be a breeding ground for imprudent investment—remember Chase et al. in the 1980s? Internet stock prices took off four times as fast there this year as the Nasdaq did in the United States.

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