

BABY-BOOMER GENERATION MISUNDERSTANDS FREEDOM

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On Wednesday, US Independence Day, in an op-ed piece, “The Downside of Liberty”, in the *New York Times*, the novelist Kurt Andersen recalled a question posed by an audience member when he addressed the Woodstock Writers Festival last spring: “Why had the revolution dreamed up in the late 1960s mostly been won on the social and cultural fronts – women’s rights, gay rights, black president, ecology, sex, drugs, rock ’n’ roll – but lost in the economic realm, with old-school free-market ideas gaining traction all the time?”

It’s a baby-boomers’ question and Andersen, born in 1954, responded in what most baby-boomers would regard as a counter-revolutionary manner. “What has happened politically, economically, culturally and socially since the sea change of the late 1960s isn’t contradictory or incongruous,” he observed. “It’s all of a piece. For hippies and bohemians, as for businesspeople and investors, extreme individualism has been triumphant. Selfishness won.”

Laying into greed and hedonism with equal fervour, Andersen approvingly quoted Thomas Jefferson: “Self-love is no part of morality.”

He described the “tacit grand bargain” forged following the 1960s revolution “between the counterculture and the establishment, between the forever-young and the moneyed”, leading to the outright unleashing of American individualism.

“Going forward, the youthful masses of every age would be permitted as never before to indulge their self-expressive and hedonistic impulses. But capitalists in return would be unshackled as well, free to indulge their own animal spirits with fewer and fewer fetters in the forms of regulation, taxes or social opprobrium.”

The right, he noted, blames the 1960s for anything-goes sexuality, multiculturalism etc, whereas the left regards the 1960s as delivering freedoms now unambiguously defined as progress. “But what the left and right respectively love and hate are mostly flip sides of the same libertarian coin minted around 1967.”

Though Andersen’s sketch is broadly accurate, his short-circuiting into moralising about greed and selfishness risks a misdiagnosis. The problem is less straightforward but more fundamental.

At the heart of both the capitalist system and the libertarianism which nowadays underlies most conventional notions of social progress lies a misunderstanding of human freedom. With the capitalist the misunderstanding is self-interestedly deliberate; with the 1960s revolutionary it is hypocritical.

Far from countercultural, the listed objectives of the 1960s “idealists” are the dark matter of the modern consumer society, fuelling notions of “rights” and “equality” which in turn propel the economic system onward to wherever it thinks it’s going.

The 1960s placed at the centre of western culture the idea that the shortest path to satisfaction was along a straight line between instinctual desire and its intuited target. Freedom was the enjoyment of what came naturally and the handbook suggested that this came without consequences once you shook off the guilt imposed by grey-bearded naysayers from whose grasp society and its instruments had been snatched.

The hippies and bohemians overthrew the bourgeois conformism of Andersen's Republican father because they came to see his values as existing largely as abstractions, devoid of a context other than social control. They missed that these apparently imposed rules and strictures were the encoded wisdom of human trial and error through the ages.

The "rules" emanated from within the human person, defining both the limits of human searching for satisfaction and proposing safeguards against potential encroachment on or from others.

They were not so much rules as laws laid down by the facts and characteristics of human existence.

In this schema, every desire has a set of potential consequences which must be considered before the cost of "freedom" can accurately be assessed. If an action of mine is likely to hurt myself or another then it is "wrong" according to a calculus of ultimate consequences, which is really what morality amounts to.

The post-1960s generations, in the US or Ireland, have not been honest about their experience of freedom. Privately – individually – many have found their pursuit of freedom did not deliver the satisfactions they craved but they have invested too much of themselves in the project to admit this.

Now approaching the denouement of their epic drama of rebellion, they pursue their totemic objectives with renewed vigour, not primarily out of the desires that once propelled them but more out of a reflex impulse prompted by nostalgia and cultural obduracy. Thus they demand gay marriage not because they are convinced of its benefits but because it would represent another "victory". They elect a black president because his colour adds a gracing aspect to their ebbing revolution.

Debt, the very definition of modern economics, is both a reflection of these dispositions and a metaphor for the revolution's avoidance of consequences. Just as the liberal agenda postpones all costs to be dealt with by posterity, the modern economy pushes its liabilities into the distant future, to be accounted for on a theoretical basis only.

But the crux of the matter is not greed, selfishness or decadence. The common denominator is a cultural phenomenon of desire misunderstood – a failure to understand that human longing cannot be met by any of the obvious things it fixes upon. This problem cannot be addressed by more rules or the renewal of morals but only by a reopening of the question: what does mankind actually want?

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