Stranger in a Familiar Land

OF TWO MINDS

To live in this prosperous market society of America feels to me both a blessing and a curse.

What a blessing it is to live in America. My ancestors, not so many generations back, lived in fear of starvation. But as I sit here at my word processor, I know that at any moment I can satisfy my hunger. I can get up and go to the kitchen, get a bowl and fill it halfway with water that is reasonably pure and safe to drink. Into the water I can sprinkle the correct quantity of quick oats. Then I put the water and bowl into the microwave, to heat for just ninety seconds—at the end of which I have a bowl of oatmeal. To the oatmeal I can add nuts, dried fruit, sesame paste, maple syrup. Filling, nutritious, comforting.

In America, even a struggling writer can afford this snack. A bowl's worth of oatmeal costs only a few pennies, since I can buy it in bulk at a mere fifty cents per pound at a nearby discount supermarket. The toppings may add at most a nickel to

the cost, when I am generous with them. The microwave, bought through a discount store for $120, has already been used for probably five thousand cooking jobs and shows no signs of wearing out. If it died today, the cost would have been just over two cents per job. The total cost of my snack cannot be more than a dime.

In America, a wage of $6 an hour is not a great deal of money. If I suppose that my labors with the pen ultimately yield me such a wage, I must conclude that to earn the right in this society to have my quick, nourishing and tasty snack, I need to ply my trade for just one minute.

How fortunate we are to enjoy the benefits of a market society such as we have in America. For it is our economic organization that makes all this possible. Without the division of labor the market fosters, how else could I hope to get a big handful of oats into my bowl in exchange for less than twenty seconds of my labor? Without the incentives that the market provides, how else would we develop the stream of innovations that now enables us to cook our oatmeal without even the bother of a pot? Without the immense network of exchange that the market creates, how could complex goods be produced and distributed so inexpensively that even people of relatively modest incomes can afford conveniences that previous generations could not imagine?

The market system works miracles. This is what members of my generation—baby boomers growing up in a prosperous postwar America—were taught by the society around us. And I recognize that it is true. What a blessing to live in America.

What a curse it is to seek the "good life" in America. The young couple in my neighborhood adore their beautiful baby, but every day they leave him for nine hours in a deadening day-care situation to be attended by someone who does not love him. Every day the light that was born in his eyes gets a little dimmer. The parents' careers seem to come before establishing a sound foundation for the child's life. Their behavior suggests that money may be more important to them than their child's heart. Or maybe they have been taught that the best way to care for a child is to make sure that they can provide it with all the good things—buying the child nice clothes and the right lessons, eventually sending it off to expensive schools.

Our ancestors, for all their privations, enjoyed a greater sense of rootedness in a human community than most of us can find in America today. Even if I had stayed in my hometown, my friends and other members of my family would have moved off in their pursuit of new lives. My "community" would have left me anyway.

But—on the other side of the same coin—what a privilege it is to enjoy the freedoms that we enjoy. In our society, a person with initiative, a person with a vision, is free to work to make his vision a reality. There are no laws that compel us to follow in the footsteps of our parents. In a free-enterprise society, the state does not dictate what path each of us is to follow. If one can invent a better mousetrap, it is the world that will beat a path to us.

This liberty has meant a lot to me. Twenty years ago I had a vision that I felt I must develop and communicate. (Eventually it was published as *The Parable of the Tribes.*) Had I not lived in a society where I could be free to pursue that work and to seek a way to communicate it to my fellow human beings, it would have been a terrible burden.

Yet the vision I have felt compelled to share includes a good deal of pain at witnessing what the dynamo of our market economy does to the sacred things within its grasp.

What pain it is to see the American landscape being molded by the bulldozers. At the beginning of 1983, I visited some friends whose little house looked back over an exquisite little canyon in San Diego, where the cholla glistened silver in the sunlight, while beyond the cactus and shrubs the cottonwoods made a border along the stream and at night sometimes the coyotes sang. By the time I saw their place again in late 1984, the bulldozers had flattened the canyon so that a few hundred new condos could be built.

Around the same time, I watched in pain as a lovely little hollow across from a grand eighteenth-century mansion near where I lived in Maryland was turned into an ugly shopping center.

Wherever you are in America, you know you'll not have to look far to find a plethora of goods of good quality at reasonable prices. Wherever you are in America, you know you will not be able to escape the transformation of the spaces we travel into unsightly commercial strips.

IS THIS THE WORLD WE WANT?

Many of the blessings of life in America are the fruits of our market economy. But many of these afflictions and burdens are also products of the market system.

The ideology of the market economy is quite willing to take credit for the abundance the system produces. But the idea that the market system creates evils is, for the most part, emphatically denied.

According to the dominant way of thinking in our society, what the market produces is the result of people freely making choices. This leads to an outcome that is close to optimal, though by the nature of things it cannot be perfect. Even wise choices involve trade-offs, and part of the consequence of liberty is that people are allowed to make unwise choices.

Thus it may be unfortunate from the point of view of my friends that their communion with the San Diego canyon was terminated, but the "invisible hand" of the market system, according to our dominant ideology, has found a more optimal way of utilizing that space. My friends lose their view, but many other people gain a place to live.

Who said there could be progress without costs? Commercial strips may not be as aesthetically pleasing as national parks, but they are there because they perform a valuable service for people—people who need to be able to get food and clothing for their families, gas for their cars, and jobs to keep the whole productive miracle happening.

And as for supposedly "unwise" choices that people make, say the ideologues of the market, that is their right. Leaving young children in day care so that the family can have two incomes may or may not be a good choice. But the choice made by the young couple across the street was theirs to make. No one forced them to do it, and we are better off to have the freedom to make unwise choices than we would be if we established some power that could prohibit them.

Besides, such an argument would continue, who are we to judge what is best for another person? The liberty of the market enables each person to be the arbiter of his or her own moral hierarchy. In any event, the market takes people's preferences or values as a given and simply helps to satisfy them whatever they are.

Thus, according to this argument, the world as it is rendered by market forces is the world we want—given the constraints imposed by reality. Of course it is not perfect, but it is the world that we, acting together by expressing our individual preferences through the market, have chosen.

This understanding of the market contains much that is valid. This book will show that it is also wrong in fundamental ways.

The market is, indeed, a marvelous mechanism for channeling human choices. The market economy gives its participants an enormous range of choice, and it is driven by the choices they make. But to conclude from these obvious facts that the market allows people to choose their destiny is a widespread and enormously influential fallacy.

Imagine a restaurant menu. The menu can be as long as a telephone book, but if all it offers are meat dishes, a vegetarian will not find anything desirable among all those choices. No matter how diverse the options, if one can get nothing to drink with one's food, the meal will be less than fully satisfying.

The market society, this work will show, is in many ways like such a restaurant. It is the nature of the market that it is simultaneously exquisitely sensitive to some categories of our needs and wants and is virtually blind and deaf to others. As a result of the inherent dynamic of the system, the market gives us a menu rich in some kinds of options and impoverished in others. Our choices are thus skewed by the nature of the system within which we make them.

The analysis of the market's selective inattention and its incapacity therefore fully to reflect the range of human values is developed in part 1, "Tunnel Vision: A Radical Critique of the Market."

We are free to pursue our private dreams. But we are not free to live in a community where human activity and the systems of living nature are in healthy balance. We are free to furnish our own homes according to our own aesthetic, utilizing a staggering variety of available goods. But we are compelled to endure the ugliness and spiritual vacuity of a landscape contorted by the narrow and uncompromising demands of producing, buying, and selling.

Not only does the market system take some vital options off the menu, even while it is offering an extraordinary range of options of wholly different kinds, but it shapes our choices

in another less visible way: over time, the market system shapes the values that govern the choices we make.

Over the generations, the culture of values that emerges in a market society bears the imprint of the market's distortions. In a superficial perspective, the young parents who choose careers and money over care of their young infant are simply making their own free choice. But in a deeper perspective, the minds and hearts that make such choices have been molded by a society that has itself been shaped by the forces of the market.

Were the market a perfect lens for providing an image of human wants, needs, and values, this warping of our choices would not occur. The market would be the magical channel that its ideologues describe it as being. But the market's selective attention, and the skewed image of human choice that results, will in the course of time distort the very needs and values the system is supposed to satisfy.

The power of the market to form us goes far beyond what the many critics of advertising describe. A social-evolutionary perspective captures a more complete and profound picture, for whatever shapes our society will thereby mold us as well. Acting subtly over the generations, the market will shape a society and its members in directions that are predictable from the nature of the system and independent of human choice.

This social evolutionary way of revealing how the market can itself choose the course of a society's development is developed here in part 2, "We Are Driven: The Market as the Engine of Change in America."

After market forces have been unleashed in America for a couple of centuries, it is no wonder that we are a people who attend more to the dimensions of the "good life" provided by the market than to those good things that cannot be bought and sold. It is no wonder that a great many parents in our country sacrifice family values for greater riches, even in families that are already living like royalty—in material terms—by the standards of human history. It is no wonder that men in America typically channel the best of their energies into the pursuit of professional advancement and choose to allocate little time for friendship. It is no wonder that shopping centers, not parks or sacred groves, become centers of our communities.

How much is a friend worth? What is the value of a loving bond with one's children? And what is the worth of an unspoiled sylvan landscape? To these questions, the market's answer is: Does not compute. And we, as children of the market society, learn to ignore what our system ignores.

Every society tends to cast its members in a mold that corresponds with what it demands, what it offers, what it rewards. The market society is no exception.

The market is no neutral tool of human agency. The market is a tool for our purposes, but we are also tools for its purposes. It is our servant, but it is also our master. It has given us choices, but—by a sleight of the invisible hand—it has also created the illusion of choice.

The exploration of the illusion of choice, therefore, will show that the world we have created with the dynamic activity of our economic system cannot be regarded as one we have chosen to create. But the question nonetheless arises whether the world the market creates is the one we would opt for if we were free to choose and if we were wise.

STRANGER IN A FAMILIAR LAND

Evaluating the market and the life it gives us requires us to ask two questions. How much do the benefits of the market system weigh in relation to their costs? Is anything better possible than the system as it is now organized?

Weighing the blessings and curses of the market is not easy. Man does not live by bread alone, but neither does he live without bread. That bowl of oatmeal should not be taken for granted.

The ideology of our market system is bolstered greatly by the fact that it makes us the envy of much of the rest of the world. And rightly so. Surely it is evidence that our market society is giving us something of real value, when hundreds of millions of people would enter this country if they could, even to live off the crumbs from our tables.

In addition, the transformations of the Communist world are proof that the Marxist critique has proved incapable of generating a social order the equal of, let alone superior to, that of liberal capitalism. The combination of inefficiency and injustice

previously displayed in the communist nations of Eastern Europe also buttressed the sense in our society that we are on the right track.

If a social order superior to ours is possible, where is it to be found? The absence of a clear answer to that question must make the critic of the market system hesitate. Is it merely "utopian," in the perjorative sense, to look for something better than this? Is one who focuses on the shortcomings of the market system merely an ungrateful child who snaps at the invisible hand that feeds him?

Possibly. But there are several reasons why we should presume that our system warrants more, not less, critical examination from us—reasons why our view of the market is likely to exaggerate its virtues and underestimate its defects.

First, the "goods" of the market—the abundant and diverse options it offers—are quite clearly visible, while the ways the market warps our society and distorts our approach to life are much harder for us to see. It is clear how the market gives me my quick and inexpensive bowl of oatmeal. But it requires far more subtlety to see the market's role, over long stretches of time, in molding people so that many of the young fathers I know find it difficult to get home from work much before their babies' bedtimes. It's easy for me to grasp my debt to the system that gives me a good quality VCR and TV to record my daily news shows and watch them at my convenience in the comfort of my own home. But less apparent is how the market has helped make so many of our neighborhoods places where people are compelled to find private pleasures to compensate for the absence of meaningful connections among a community of families.

It is obvious how abundant are the goods on our supermarket shelves. But we must use our imagination to notice what we can't buy, especially those things we cannot obtain even by other means. In the very nature of things, therefore, it is easier for us to be aware of what *is* than of what is *not* on the menu we are given. Just as it took a Sherlock Holmes, in the famous story "Purple Blaze," to hear the crucial clue—that the dog did not bark—so do we need to be detectives to discover what are the silent costs of our abundance.

A second factor is that our socialization teaches us to see the benefits of the system we live in and to be blind to its defects. Every social order imparts propaganda to strengthen

the allegiance of its members, or subjects. The market society teaches us in a thousand ways—least subtly in the tidal wave of commercial messages that flood our consciousness everyday—that goods are what is good. The material standard of living becomes virtually identified as the standard for judging our lives. When we speak of what someone is "worth"—"This guy is worth $2 million"—we typically speak in the market's language.

By implication, entire universes of discourse about value are moved into the shadows of our awareness, or perhaps disappear altogether. To understand the importance of what we may have lost—in interpersonal relationships or intrapersonal integrity, in community and in a reverent and harmonious relationship with our natural surroundings—requires a breakthrough of consciousness, an awakening, to achieve.

But then there is the pain. One should never underestimate the influence on our consciousness of the desire to avoid pain. Whatever the goods and evils of the world as it is, we have a strong motive to believe the world is as it should be.

Part of the pain of seeing clearly the sicknesses of our society is the pain of alienation. It hurts to put ourselves at odds with the world we live in. There is the temptation to remain in harmony with our own society rather than to be out of joint even with a world that itself is out of joint. Who wants to feel like a stranger in one's own country?

When I was a child, I had a football-game mentality that put me in good stead for succeeding, and for being comfortable, in the world around me. More was always better than less; the score was everything. We lived in a small town in Michigan then, and I took great pride in such things as the proportion of the world's automobile production that took place in my home state, not to mention the impressive tonnage that was shipped through the port of Sault Ste. Marie, also in my state. Numbers on scoreboards accounted for much in the game of life.

Whatever was impressive and dramatic and powerful was good, as far as I was concerned. When my family and I traveled to the big city of Philadelphia to visit relatives, I thought it grand that Philadelphia was surrounded by these enormous and complex refineries. The flames shooting up from some of their vents were fantastic; even the sulphurous smell I regarded as positive, it being an indication of the

wondrous processes taking place within this network of tubes and tanks.

I now see these things differently, and there is a cost to the difference. I do miss being able to see the sprawling industrial apparatus of our economy with the same sense of awe and appreciation that I could then. In a way that is no longer true, I felt I truly belonged to my world then.

But I must recognize that there was much that my childish eyes did not understand in what they saw. Back then, when we drove in the streets of Philadephia, there was something else I enjoyed seeing that I didn't see at home. I thought it was "neat" to see the drunks wandering the city streets. It is embarrassing to remember, and to report, my insensitivity to the human tragedy each one of these derelicts embodied. To me, each drunk represented an exciting drama. I took satisfaction in counting how many I saw.

In time, I put away my childish eyes and began to see the world in other ways. Sometimes, now, I feel like a stranger in a familiar land. There is pain in that.

It hurts in another way, too. The more we see the agony of the world around us, the more suffering we ourselves must endure.

In my own life, I have found the most fundamental and fateful choice to be: to see or not to see. My own awareness vacillates between two different modes. In one, my usual one, I more or less accept the world as it is and feel comfortable in it. In the other, I feel an acute awareness of how out of joint the world is, how much of sacred value is being destroyed. At those times, I feel a profound and painful feeling of loss.

But the difference in terms of pain versus comfort is not the only difference between these two states of consciousness. The one that hurts also feels more alive and real. When my eyes are clear, when my heart is most open, then I am most likely to see the distress of the world. And the fullness of the experience always seems to me a validation of the perception.

Reality hurts. But, ultimately, it is reality that we live in and that we have to deal with. You don't have to know about the toxic waste dump in your backyard to get cancer from it. We don't have to feel the pain in our children's lives to reap the harvest of what we sow in them.

We in America have much to be thankful for. The market system has served many of our needs well. But the market also

creates a world askew, more out of joint than most of us, most of the time, wish to see. It behooves us, therefore, to look carefully into the market system, to evaluate critically the destiny the market is shaping for us. And, perhaps, to reshape the system in order to fashion a better destiny for ourselves and for those who come after us.