



“Summary of article by Robert E. Lane: The Road Not Taken: Friendship, Consumerism, and Happiness” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 101-103

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Since the mid-1960s there has been a dramatic rise in the incidence of clinical depression in economically advanced and rapidly advancing countries. Lack of companionship and social support is one of the principle causes for depression. This paper considers whether and how the "rage to consume" fostered by market economies may be weakening social ties and thus leading to an increase in the cases of clinical depression.

AFFLUENCE AND DEPRESSION

Advanced economies as well as rapidly modernizing countries have been experiencing a rising tide of depression. As demonstrated in a study of nine different countries by Myrha Weissman and a cross-cultural group of scholars, not only are people suffering from depression at an earlier age than previously, as shown in a different study of the United States, but people born after 1945 are ten times more likely to suffer from depression than those born earlier. Each succeeding generation since World War II has shown a greater tendency toward depression; new research suggests that a quarter of the American population now experiences depression at least once over the course of their lives.

The chronic absence or loss of friends, as well as weak social support in general, is one of the crucial explanatory factors in depression. Major depression leads to feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and worthlessness as well as to physical manifestations such as insomnia, hypertension and a loss of energy. In addition to these personal effects of depression, there are also wide ranging societal costs. Not only are unhappy people harder to associate with, they are also less effective at work or school and more susceptible to other disorders. A higher rate of absences from work and the heavy cost of treatment or hospitalization incurred by depression are born by society in general.

The documented rise of depression in modernized or rapidly modernizing areas of the world has not been seen in the less developed countries, suggesting a relation between modernity and depression, and undermining the doctrine that market economies maximize well-being.

CONSUMER CULTURE AND FRIENDSHIP

Although the loss of social networks may be both cause and consequence of depression, increasing consumption oriented activities at the cost of friendship explains an important portion

of the recent growth in clinical depression. Three factors contribute to social isolation within market economies: television viewing, the shopping experience and the nature of what is consumed. There are various theories that explain why the structure of market economies is directly responsible for the increase in social isolation, but none of them are clearly supported by the evidence. The time and attention that people devote to commodities cannot be proven to crowd out the time and attention they give to affiliation. In fact, in periods when the time spent on market work declined, such as the decade from 1965 to 1975, the newly available time was devoted neither to shopping nor socializing, but to watching television. While this activity may promote certain social feelings, television viewing promotes passivity and social isolation.

Both the increasingly impersonal character of shopping and the increasingly individualized nature of affluent consumption contribute little to social interaction. "The demise of the neighborhood store, the colder relations between shopkeepers and their clients, and the modesty of the growth of husband-wife shopping all suggest an increasingly unsociable climate for consumers." (540) Also, beyond a certain income level, disposable income is more likely to be spent on goods consumed by individuals than on goods consumed collectively by households. For example, recent analyses of household budgets indicate that expenditures on personal care and apparel have risen much faster than other, more communal aspects of household budgets, such as food.

If depression may be cured or avoided by stronger social connections, and if happiness is unaffected by the consumption of material goods above a certain level, why then do people in market economies continue to pursue the acquisition of commodities rather than the cultivation of friendships? There are several possible answers to this central question. In general, perhaps we have been distracted from an effective pursuit of happiness by an ideology of scarcity that has persisted from the times of our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Another major part of the problem lies in the assumption of market economies that people have perfect knowledge of what will lead to their own felicity. People often do not know what makes them happy. Other possible explanations for our unwillingness to replace commodities with friendships are: the addictiveness of immediate gratification versus long term gains; the lack of a way to measure the hedonic yield of friendship; and the direct and indirect effects of advertising which perpetuates the idea that well-being is achieved only through consumption.

GIVING FRIENDSHIP PRIORITY OVER COMMODITIES

Giving friendship priority over commodities promises to protect against depression and lead to happiness for five additional reasons. First, the satisfactions of friendship mature slowly whereas the pleasures of consumption are often instantaneous. Second, friendship is a variable sum game and eternally expandable. Third, self-esteem, the key characteristic associated with happiness and one of the most effective guards against depression, has been shown to be unrelated to income level but closely linked with intimacy. Fourth, in opposition to the system of financial rewards on which market economies work, friendship is based on a reward system of praise, one that is more likely to be interpreted as informational rather than controlling. Finally, in comparison to consumption, friendship is ecologically friendly.

Economic growth has obviously failed to solve the rising deficit of companionship as it is in the wealthiest and most rapidly modernizing countries that this problem exists. The welfare state, democracy's attempted solution to distress, has worked no better, as it has been proven that unemployment and welfare are isolating experiences, with a much higher rate of depression among public dependents than among the employed. New solutions to the rising tide of depression within market economies urgently need to be found. While a sense of personal control over one's life has been shown to be an effective substitute for social support as antidote to depression, cultivating the bonding instinct natural to the human species is more likely to work as a long term solution.