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How Markets Corrupt Children,  
Infertilize Adults, and Swallow  
Citizens Whole

BENJAMIN R. BARBER



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## Capitalism Triumphant and the Infantilist Ethos

Last of all, that ends [man's] eventful history,  
Is second childishness. . . .

—Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II, vii

When I was a child I spake as a child,  
I understood as a child, I thought as a child,  
but when I became a man I put away childish things.

—St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:11, the New Testament

IN THESE PALTRY times of capitalism's triumph, as we slide into consumer narcissism, Shakespeare's seven ages of man are in danger of being washed away by lifelong puerility. Pop-cultural journalists have used many terms to depict a new species of perennial adolescent: *kidults*, *rejuveniles*, *twixters*, and *adultescents*;<sup>1</sup> around the world Germans speak of "Nesthocker," Italians of "Mammone," Japanese of "Freeter," Indians of "Zippies," and the French of a "Tanguy" syndrome and "puériculture." What they are discerning with their pop neologisms is the consequence of a powerful new cultural ethos, felt more than recognized. It is an ethos of induced childishness: an infantilization that is closely tied to the demands of consumer capitalism in a global market economy.

This infantilist ethos is as potent in shaping the ideology and behaviors of our radical consumerist society today as what Max Weber called the "Protestant ethic" was in shaping the entrepreneurial culture of what was then a productivity early capitalist society. Affiliated with an ideology of privatization, the marketing of brands, and a homogenization of taste,

this ethos of infantilization has worked to sustain consumer capitalism, but at the expense of both civility and civilization and at a growing risk to capitalism itself. Although we use the term *democratic capitalism* in a manner that suggests a certain redundancy, the reality is that the two words describe different systems often in tension with one another. Consumerism has set the two entirely asunder.

How much should we care? In an epoch when terrorism stalks the planet, when fear of jihad is as prevalent as the infringement of liberties to which fear gives rise, when AIDS and tsunamis and war and genocide put democracy at risk in both the developing and the developed world, it may seem self-indulgent to fret about the dangers of hyperconsumerism. When poor children in the developing world are being exploited, starved, prostituted, and impressed into military service, anxiety about the prosperous young in the developed world who may be growing up into consumers too fast, or about adult consumers being dumbed down too easily, can seem parochial, even solipsistic.

Yet as James Madison said long ago, the pathologies of liberty can be as perilous as the pathologies of tyranny; and far more difficult to discern or remedy. Although forces of jihad continue to struggle violently against the successes of McWorld, and the abuse of children living under poverty remains a far greater problem than the infantilization of adults living under prosperity, modernization appears to be irreversible over the long term. But the fate of citizens under capitalism triumphant is another matter. The victory of consumers is not synonymous with the victory of citizens. McWorld can prevail and liberty can still lose. The diseases of prosperity which are the afflictions of capitalism do not kill outright. They violate no explicit laws of justice. Yet capitalism's success breeds new and dangerous challenges.

Capitalism *per se* is not the issue. The question is not whether there is an alternative to markets but whether markets can be made to meet the real needs capitalism is designed to serve, whether capitalism can adapt to the sovereignty of democratic authority that alone will allow it to survive.

ONCE UPON A time, capitalism was allied with virtues that also contributed at least marginally to democracy, responsibility, and citizenship.

Today it is allied with vices which—although they serve consumerism—undermine democracy, responsibility, and citizenship. The question then is whether not just democracy but capitalism itself can survive the infantilist ethos upon which it has come to depend. This book, after it diagnoses either capitalism's market pathologies, offers a qualified yes. What is clear is that either capitalism will replace the infantilist ethos with a democratic ethos, and regain its capacity to promote equality as well as profit, diversity as well as consumption, or infantilization will undo not only democracy but capitalism itself. Much will depend on our capacity to make sense out of infantilization and relate it to the not-so-creative destruction of consumerism's survival logic.

The idea of an "infantilist ethos" is as provocative and controversial as the idea of what Weber called the "Protestant ethic." *Infantilization* is at once both an elusive and a confrontational term, a potent metaphor that points on the one hand to the dumbing down of goods and shoppers in a postmodern global economy that seems to produce more goods than people need, and that points, on the other hand, to the targeting of children as consumers in a market where there are never enough shoppers. Once a staple of Freudian psychology focused on the psychopathology of regression, the term *infantilization* has in the last several years become a favorite of worrywart journalists: David Ansen fretting about the "widespread infantilization of pop culture";<sup>2</sup> Leon Wieseltier charging that "Hollywood is significantly responsible for the infantilization of America";<sup>3</sup> Philip Hensher of Britain's *The Independent* sure that the "signs that adult culture is being infantilized are everywhere."<sup>4</sup>

On the potency of adolescent culture, liberals and conservatives agree. Writes Robert J. Samuelson, a moderate liberal: "We live in an age when people increasingly refuse to act their age. The young (or many of them) yearn to be older, while the older (or many of them) yearn to be younger. We have progressively demolished the life cycle's traditional stages, shortening childhood and following it with a few murky passages. Adolescence . . . begins before puberty and, for some, lasts forever . . . age denial is everywhere."<sup>5</sup> Samuelson is echoed by Joseph Epstein, a moderate conservative: "The whole sweep of advertising, which is to say of market, culture since soon after World War II has been continuously to lower the criteria

of youthfulness while extending the possibility for seeming youthful to older and older people."<sup>6</sup> Even conservatives who reject the charge of consumer infantilization recognize its potency. George F. Will thus charges progressive thinkers with advancing the thesis of the "infantilism of the American public" as one more "we are all victims of manipulation" explanation for Bush's victory in the 2004 presidential campaign.<sup>7</sup> Little surprise then that popular magazines such as *Time* ("They Just Won't Grow Up") and *New York Magazine* ("Forever Youngish: Why Nobody Wants to Be an Adult Anymore") worry in major cover articles about America's Peter Pan tendencies.<sup>8</sup>

There is anecdotal evidence everywhere: airport police handing out lollipops to placate irate passengers at inspection points;<sup>9</sup> television news divisions turned over to entertainment executives, *Vanity Fair*-style pop-cultural chatter about "entrepreneurs," and the *New York Times Magazine* enthusing about "what kids want in fashion, right from the filly's mouth" on the way to urging thongs on seven-year-olds;<sup>10</sup> the professionalization of high-school sports that turns teen basketball courts into NBA recruiting turf and basketball-player bodies into advertising billboards; adult fiction readers flocking to *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* (when they are not abandoning reading altogether); fast-food franchises girding the world to exploit (among other things) children's restless aversion to grown-up sit-down dining; teen guy games such as *World of Warcraft*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and *Narc* and comic-book films such as *Terminator*, *Spider-Man*, *Carwoman*, and *Shrek* dominating the entertainment market; new "educational" television channels such as BabyFirstTV and videos such as "Baby Einstein"; cosmetic surgery and Botox injections promising a fountain of youth to female baby boomers who envy their daughters;<sup>11</sup> sexual performance drugs such as Levitra, Cialis, and Viagra (2002 sales of over \$1 billion) becoming staples of equally uncomfortable male boomers trying to smuggle atavistic youth into the age of social security; and businessmen in baseball caps, jeans, and untucked shirts mimicking the studied sloppiness of their unformed kids. Beyond pop culture, the infantalist ethos also dominates: dogmatic judgments of black and white in politics and religion come to displace the nuanced complexi-

ties of adult morality, while the marks of perpetual childishness are grafted onto adults who indulge in puerility without pleasure, and indulgence without innocence. Hence, the new consumer penchant for age without dignity, dress without formality, sex without reproduction, work without discipline, play without spontaneity, acquisition without purpose, certainty without doubt, life without responsibility, and narcissism into old age and unto death without a hint of wisdom or humility. In the epoch in which we now live, civilization is not an ideal or an aspiration, it is a video game.<sup>12</sup>

These myriad anecdotes tell a story, but infantilization—not second childhood but enduring childishness—is much more than just a mesmeric metaphor. A new cultural ethos is being forged that is intimately associated with global consumerism. Those responsible for manufacturing and merchandizing goods for the global marketplace, those who are actually researching, teaching, and practicing marketing and advertising today, are aiming both to sell to a younger demographic and to imbue older consumers with the tastes of the young.

Marketers and merchandisers are self-consciously chasing a youthful commercial constituency sufficiently padded in its pocketbook to be a very attractive market, yet sufficiently unformed in its tastes as to be vulnerable to conscious corporate manipulation via advertising, marketing, and branding. At the same time, these avatars of consumer capitalism are seeking to encourage adult regression, hoping to rekindle in grown-ups the tastes and habits of children so that they can sell globally the relatively useless cornucopia of games, gadgets, and myriad consumer goods for which there is no discernible "need market" other than the one created by capitalism's own frantic imperative to sell. As child-development scholar Susan Linn puts it in her critical study of what she calls "the hostile takeover of childhood," corporations are vying "more and more aggressively for young consumers" while popular culture "is being smothered by commercial culture relentlessly sold to children who [are valued] for their consumption."<sup>13</sup>

As the population in the developed world ages—the irony of infantilization—the definition of youth simply moves up, with baby boomers in the

United States smuggling it into their senior years. Meanwhile, the young are big spenders way before they are even modest earners: in 2000, there were 31 million American kids between twelve and nineteen already controlling 155 billion consumer dollars.<sup>14</sup> Just four years later, there were 33.5 million kids controlling \$169 billion, or roughly \$91 per week per kid.<sup>15</sup> The potential youth market is even more impressive elsewhere in the world, where a far greater proportion of the population is under twenty-five, and where new prosperity in nations such as India and China promises a youth market of hundreds of millions in the coming years.

*The Economist* summed it up a few years ago in its millennium special report: "Once, when you grew up you put away childish things. Today, the 35-year-old Wall Street analyst who zips to work on his push-scooter, listening to Moby on his headphones and carrying annual reports in his backpack, has far more in common with a 20-year-old than he would have done a generation ago."<sup>16</sup> John Tierney notes in the *New York Times* that Americans are marrying older (since 1970 the median age for marriage has moved up four years, to twenty-five for women and twenty-seven for men), and that thirty is the new twenty, and forty is the new thirty.<sup>17</sup> In Hollywood, where aspiring to stay young is as old as movies and everything is hyperbole, "40 is the new 30 and 50 the new 40, but only, it seems, when that new 40 and 50 have been surgically enhanced. . . . These days, when a 40-plus-year-old actress lands a starring part opposite a 60-plus-year-old actor, such age-appropriate casting seems meaningless because the actress has a face as unlined as a teenage girl's."<sup>18</sup>

As many as four million not-so-young adults between twenty-five and thirty-four still live with their parents in the United States, many of them middle-class. In Britain, the Office for National Statistics revealed the same trend, noting that "57 per cent of men and 38 per cent of women aged 20-24 are now living with their parents." According to the 2005 report, "by their late 20s more than one in five men still live at their parents' homes, twice the rate of women."<sup>19</sup> "Unencumbered by rent—or mortgages or children," these stay-at-homes have "lots of disposable income, which is why marketers have happily focused on adolescents since at least 1996."<sup>20</sup> A physicians' organization called the Society for Adolescent Medicine reports on its website that it is concerned with people ten to twenty-six

years old, while the MacArthur Foundation's "Transitions to Adulthood" project puts the transition's end at thirty-four years old.

The irony of infantilization is, of course, that Americans are actually getting older: the median age having moved from twenty-five in the baby-boomer high-water year of 1960 to thirty-five in 2000; by 2050 there will be more in their seventies than in their teens.<sup>21</sup> The same is true with a vengeance for Europe, and for the indigenous populations (immigrants excluded) of the developed world generally. Only in the Third World and in the Third World immigrant communities of the First World is the majority constituted by the young—although they often lack the means to express their puerility in consumption. Likewise, in the United States, more than a third of those who live below the poverty line are children, who like their cousins in the developing world are relatively insulated by their poverty from the consequences, if not the temptations, of consumer marketing.

Once upon a time, in capitalism's more creative and successful period, a *productivist* capitalism prospered by meeting the real needs of real people. Creating a synergy between making money and helping others (the Puritan Protestant formula for entrepreneurial virtue), producers profited by making commodities for the workers they employed—a circle of virtue that, while it involved elements of risk-taking for producers and exploitation of workers, benefited both classes and society at large. Today, however, consumerist capitalism profits only when it can address those whose essential needs have already been satisfied but who have the means to assuage "new" and invented needs—Marx's "imaginary needs." The global majority still has extensive and real natural needs mirroring what psychologists T. Berry Brazelton and Stanley I. Greenspan have called "the irreducible needs of children."<sup>22</sup> But it is without the means to address them, being cut off by the global market's inequality (the "north/south divide") from the investment in capital and jobs that would allow them to become consumers. This is true not just for the global Third World but for the growing Third World within the First World, the poor who live among the wealthy, exposed to the seductions of the consumer marketplace but without the means to participate in it.

Denizens of the developed world from North America and Europe to

Korea and Japan grow older chronologically but younger in their behavior, style, and controlling ethos, with children dominating consumer markets and the taste cultures that support them in ways that subvert adult culture. Elsewhere in the developing world, though the demographic grows younger (recall the familiar fact that more than half of the population of the Middle East is under sixteen), children remain marginalized and in poverty, irrelevant as consumers despite their overwhelming needs and forced to grow up prematurely, becoming little soldiers, little prostitutes, and little garment-factory workers, giving some to the global market economy but gaining little from it. They are wholly disempowered even where they are used and abused. And they are always the first to pay the cost of global economic inequalities. Their needs are ignored by global capitalism since they have no disposable income to pay for them. Even the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the institutions charged with responding to their needs, impose "conditionality" on the aid and loans with which they purport to alleviate their problems. "Corrupt" and "inefficient" Third World governments are punished; the kids starve, fall ill, and die. In war and poverty, in natural disaster and man-made genocide, they are most often the first victims and the last to benefit from capitalism's otherwise voracious appetite for consumers.

In this new epoch in which the needy are without income and the well-heeled are without needs, radical inequality is simply assumed. The United States and Canada, for example, with just over 5 percent of the world's population, control almost one-third (31.5 percent) of the world's private consumption expenditures. Western Europe, with 6.4 percent of the population, controls almost 29 percent of expenditures—that means 11.5 percent of the world's population controls 60 percent of the world's consumer spending. On the other hand, sub-Saharan Africa, with nearly 11 percent of the population, controls only 1.2 percent of consumer expenditures.<sup>23</sup>

Inequality leaves capitalism with a dilemma: the overproducing capitalist market must either grow or expire. If the poor cannot be enriched enough to become consumers, then grown-ups in the First World who are currently responsible for 60 percent of the world's consumption, and with

vast disposable income but few needs, will have to be enticed into shopping. Inducing them to remain childish and impetuous in their taste helps ensure that they will buy the global market goods designed for indolent and prosperous youth. When translated into figures for comparative spending on advertising versus spending on foreign aid, these grim inequalities yield a remarkable contrast: while the United States spent about \$16 billion in foreign aid in 2003, the projected American expenditure for advertising for 2005 was \$276 billion (about one-half of the world's projected advertising expenditure for 2005).<sup>24</sup> If manufacturing needs rather than goods is a primary task of consumer capitalism, however, the massive advertising and marketing budgets are understandable.

Marx himself had remarked in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 on the dislodging of old-fashioned industries by new industries in which "in place of old wants, we find new wants." Calvin Coolidge had presciently depicted advertising as "the method by which the desire is created for better things," anticipating by nearly forty years Guy Debord's more radical claim in the 1960s that "the satisfaction of primary human needs, [is] now met in the most summary manner, by a ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs."<sup>25</sup> Many of the needs of children that can be regarded as "irreducible," on the other hand, cannot be met by the market at all, but depend on kinship relations, parenting, self-IMAGE, learning, and limiting.<sup>26</sup> Because so many needs are beyond what capitalism produces and sells, capitalism demands what Keynes called a certain "pumping up" of purchasing power. The founder of Filene's department store, on a visit to Paris back in 1935, grasped even then that (in Victoria de Grazia's description) "the chief economic problem facing the industrial world was to distribute goods in accordance with the now patently inexhaustible capacity to produce them. Not the overproduction of merchandise, but its nondistribution was the problem."<sup>27</sup> From the point of view of business-people, they were not producing too much, consumers were buying too little.

This was a theme that coursed through consumerist capitalism from the start. By our own times, it was a theme picked up by marketers for whom the fabricating of needs seemed the better part of wisdom. We no



longer have to reference Vance Packard's warning about hidden persuaders: the persuaders have come out of the closet and are teaching corporate managers the arts of marketing to teens at national conferences and are articulating toddler marketing techniques in textbooks and business-school marketing courses. Nor do we need Herbert Marcuse's subtle argument about the one-dimensionality of modern men: clever marketing consultants are openly subverting pluralistic human identity in pursuit not simply of brand loyalty but of lifelong brand identity.

In other words, I am not reading the notion of infantilization into what the market is doing in order to illuminate its practices in an era of mandatory selling; I am extrapolating out of the actual practices of the consumer marketplace the idea of pumping up purchasing power, manufacturing needs, and encouraging infantilization. I am not suggesting in the passive voice that there "is a process of infantilization under way." I am arguing that many of our primary business, educational, and governmental institutions are consciously and purposefully engaged in infantilization and as a consequence that we are vulnerable to such associated practices as privatization and branding. For this is how we maintain a system of consumerist capitalism no longer supported by the traditional market forces of supply and demand.

The argument here then rests on and gives systematic expression to the message of such merchandizing advocates as Gene Del Vecchio. Del Vecchio tells clients that capitalism is under siege and that to sell in the global marketplace where "the demand for adult goods and services has proven not to be endless,"<sup>28</sup> and where there is little profit in selling to those who are in need, manufacturers must not only create homogenous global products aimed at the wealthy young, but must embark on what another marketer calls a veritable "consumerization of the child."<sup>29</sup> The new capitalism must spark a "kidquake of kid-directed goods and services" aimed at children old enough "to articulate their preferences—hence, children ages four and older."<sup>30</sup> At such conferences on marketing to children as Youth Power 2005 in New York (February 24–25, 2005) and the Youth Marketing Mega Event held most recently in Huntington, California (April 10–13, 2005), panel topics have included "Reaching Kids

Through Causes—An In-Depth Tutorial in How to Market with a Heart" and "Youth Observatory Ethnography Fieldtrip," which promise to help companies continually refresh "their knowledge about Toddlers, Teens and Tweens or run the risk of being 'so yesterday.'"

Such conferences have spread globally to places like Paris (Youth Marketer Conference, April 7–8, 2005, with a panel called "How to acquire and retain customers in the 0–25 [sic] age group"), Singapore (Marketing to Youth Conference: Customizing Conventional Marketing Strategies to Target Specifically at Youths, May 18–19, 2005), Sydney (Youth Marketing, May 20–June 2, 2005), and Shanghai (Youth Marketing Forum China: Targeted Marketing Strategies for Reaching Young Consumers Across China, May 2–26, 2005). These strategies are more than a matter of advertising—though it is certainly a matter of advertising, given that the advertising industry in the United States alone spent over \$230 billion in 2001, with as much as \$40 billion aimed at children (up from \$2.2 billion in 1968 and \$4.2 billion in 1984).<sup>31</sup>

The phenomenon is global, with world advertising expected to increase by 5 percent a year over the next few years, with commensurate amounts to be spent on children. Europe is already approaching \$100 billion per annum, Latin American advertising is growing 5 percent per annum and is already over \$16 billion a year. China is beginning to see the profits that can be earned from the eight- to twenty-one-year-old youth market, whose members have an aggregate annual income totaling perhaps \$40 billion. While it is only \$9 billion today, China is projected to grow to \$12 billion by 2006 and to \$18 billion by 2011, when it will become the third largest advertising market in the world.<sup>32</sup>

What observers say about China now is little different from what they say about France or Mexico: "Chinese kids, teens and young adults play an important role in the Chinese consumer retail markets . . . (as) direct spenders" but also, as in the West, in their capacity to "influence their parents' purchasing decisions" and in their growing online spending.<sup>33</sup> In a nation where the one-child policy has created hundreds of millions of families with six adults (two parents, four grandparents) focused on the needs and wants of one child, the climate for infantilizing the market



(never mind spoiling the kids) seems extraordinarily promising—if that is the word—while its impact on China's coming global role seems more than disconcerting.

In the United States, no one has identified what is happening with greater lucidity than Boston College cultural critic Juliet B. Schor: "The United States," she writes, "is the most consumer-oriented society in the world . . . [and] the architects of this culture . . . have now set their sights on children. . . . Kids and teens are now the epicenter of American consumer culture. They command the attention, creativity, and dollars of advertisers. Their tastes drive market trends. Their opinions shape brand strategies."<sup>34</sup> Thus, consumerism urges us to retrieve the childish things the Bible told us we had to put away, and to enter into the new world of electronic toys, games, and gadgets that constitute a modern digital playground for adults who, the market seems to have concluded, no longer need to grow up. Rather than employ schools to help children grow out of their toys, we import toys into the schools—video games and computers as "edutainment" teaching aids, as well as ad-sponsored TV in the classroom.<sup>35</sup> Game developer Marc Prensky makes the stakes clear: "The commercial world is promising and delivering," he says. Jenn Shreve adds: "[T]raditional teaching methods simply can't compete with the appeal of a commercial world of games that makes children heroes or puts the fate of Harry Potter in their hands."<sup>36</sup>

In high-school classrooms across America, this commercialization is supported by outfits like Channel One Network that offer in-school soft "news" television complete with hard advertisements that sell at rates which rival such prime-time specials as the American football Super Bowl.<sup>37</sup> In higher education, colleges and universities that once acted as a counterpoint to commercial culture today have gone prostrate before corporate sponsors of research that academic administrators have neither the will nor the independent funding to oppose. Higher education has always been prone to the forces of vocationalism (Thorstein Veblen wrote an angry critique in 1918). Its decline into the multiversity "knowledge factory" Clark Kerr wrote about in the 1960s only marked the beginning of its modern corporatization—about which Stanley Aronowitz on the left

and Allan Bloom on the right have in their own ways vociferously complained, and about which I will comment below in my discussion of privatization.<sup>38</sup>

Today's new higher-ed corruption comes from treating students themselves not as autonomous learners but as free consumers and not yet committed brand-shoppers—clients of educational services. Vendors see a \$200-billion-a-year market made up of "a particularly attractive subset of American youth" who are still shopping for brands and who control extraordinary disposable income and market influence over their parents and other adults.<sup>39</sup> Cash-strapped colleges and universities see "co-branding" opportunities (an exclusive contract with Coke or Pepsi, a stadium naming opportunity) as a "free" source of replenishment for budgets starved by state funding reductions.

But corporate marketers do not limit themselves to turning education into merchandizing, they turn merchandizing into education, making each moment of the child's day into a merchandizing opportunity—pop-up ads on the internet where students now do their homework instead of in ad-free libraries, holidays which were formerly "holy days" (Thanksgiving, Christmas, Ramadan, Hanukkah, Easter, and Kwanza) turned into selling marathons along with secular holidays like Valentine's Day, Presidents' Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Labor Day, all given their own unique commercial inflections, each offering, in Richard Woodward's phrase, "a testament to the bottomless ingenuity of capitalism."<sup>40</sup>

In higher education and elsewhere, the commercializing ethos of infantilization encourages and is encouraged by a political ideology of privatization that delegitimizes adult public goods such as critical thinking and public citizenship (once the primary objectives of higher education) in favor of self-involved private choice and narcissistic personal gain. A college marketing specialist thus sees students first of all as "voracious consumers who use self-gratification to offset the rigors of academics and the stress of an uncertain future."<sup>41</sup> The ethos catalyzes a novel identity politics in which consumer branding rather than race, religion, and other forms of ascriptive identity along with voluntary civic and political identity comes to define who we are. Deliberation and common ground have

largely vanished in political debate; reductive talk-radio programming encourages callers to behave like spoiled children; scream-television cable shows pretend to be news programming but are strictly for entertainment. More and more people ascribe to simplistic religious ideologies rooted in dogma and absolutism rather than common faith and universal morals.<sup>42</sup>

More and more adults, according to conservative critic Joseph Epstein, are "locked in a high school of the mind, eating dry cereal, watching a vast quantity of television, hoping to make sexual scores" and generally enjoying "perpetual adolescence, cut loose, free of responsibility, without the real pressures that life, that messy business, always exerts."<sup>43</sup> Juliet Schor on the left agrees that "we have become a nation that places a lower priority on teaching its children how to thrive socially, intellectually, even spiritually, than it does on training them to consume."<sup>44</sup> Norma Pecora argues that "with the consumerization of the child comes the ideological shaping of the adult. That is not to say we will all demand our Lion King as adults, though several recent commercials play on the child within, but we will come to expect life to play out in particular ways."<sup>45</sup> It is our expectations about how life plays out that the infantalist ethos conditions.

The celebration of youth is more than merely a lifestyle choice. Some people are seeking to change biology as well. The Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine denies that aging is "natural and inevitable,"<sup>46</sup> an attitude that gives rise to a celebration of the unnatural and perverse—of surgical and pharmaceutical fountains of perpetual youth and cryonic engines of eternal life.<sup>47</sup> Youth is where the money is, whether consumers are old or young.

In the emerging world of total commerce, there is also advertising on parking meters, advertising on public buildings, advertising on so-called public noncommercial television, ubiquitous blimp- and airplane-borne (smoke generated) signage, naming opportunities on public buildings such as sports stadiums once associated with public figures, and advertising possibilities in outer space—once it is militarized, why not commercialize it as well? The last frontier, now crossed, is not, however, outer space but the human body. The selling of the body, which with the pass-

ing of actual slavery became a metaphor for coercive exchanges that were largely invisible (Marx and Foucault), has today become a toxic but remarkably well tolerated exemplar of the subordination of identity to commerce, and includes the selling of the constituent elements of the human genome. Roughly 20 percent of the genome has now been patented for private commercial use, and the trend is accelerating. As with so many other elements in the global race to the bottom, it is globalization that drives privatization: the quest for genetic patents is a function of the globalization of research. If "we" don't do it, the Koreans or the French or the Chinese will. And since consumables along with the "need" for them must in any case be marketed globally for capitalism in its late consumer phase to flourish, bioengineering, cloning, and other advanced forms of genetic research are bound to be put into corporate hands.

Globalization stimulates selling to the young in another important way as well. The global market turns out to be defined by the relatively common tastes of the young. Adult cultures are plural and distinctive, but youth culture is remarkably universal. In the apt description of Chip Walker, "despite different cultures, middle-class youth all over the world seem to live their lives as if in a parallel universe. They get up in the morning, put on their Levi's and Nikes, grab their caps, backpacks, and Sony personal CD players, and head for school."<sup>48</sup> There are French *citoyens* and Ibo tribesmen and Iraqi Sunnis and Brazilian patriots, but kids are kids are kids. If their countries and tribes and religions can be made to appear as secondary to their global market tastes and youth-branded appetites as children, capitalism need not be impeded by pluralism. A *global* consumer economy in a world of differentiated cultures depends on the ability to sell uniform goods. According to Naomi Klein, the question is quite precisely: "What is the best way to sell identical products across multiple borders? What voice should advertisers use to address the whole world at once? How can one company accommodate cultural difference while still remaining internally coherent?"<sup>49</sup> The business guru James U. McNeal, who has written what admirers call the "bible for all children's marketers,"<sup>50</sup> has a compelling answer:

In general, it appears that before there is a geographic culture, there is a children's culture; that children are very much alike around the industrialized world. They love to play . . . they love to snack . . . and they love being children with other children (in contrast to assuming most adult roles). The result is that they very much want the same things, that they generally translate their needs into similar wants that tend to transcend culture. Therefore, it appears that fairly standardized multinational marketing strategies to children around the globe are viable.<sup>31</sup>

The starting point for McNeal's logic, as well as Klein's, a logic which turns out to be the spirit of modern consumer capitalism, is William Greider's global market world of surplus production,<sup>32</sup> too many goods chasing too few consumers in an era of growing inequality and diminishing consumer wants, at least among those with disposable income, and in a global economy where customers with the means to buy are too diverse to desire the same goods (if they desire any at all). Quite simply, in a world of too many commodities and too few shoppers, "children become valuable as consumers."<sup>33</sup>

Market to kids and secure a single planetary market. That is the blunt strategy embraced by marketing advocate Arundhati Parmar, who writes enticingly about "global youth united" as a "homogenous group" that can be a "prime target for U.S. marketers."<sup>34</sup> And as a bonus, the client constituency grows as the children grow. As Dr. David Jones and Doris Klein wrote over thirty-five years ago, "the child wants what it wants when it wants it, without consideration of the needs of others, and man-child does not outgrow this pattern."<sup>35</sup>

Frozen in time, aging adults remain youth consumers throughout their lives, the "men-children" of Jones and Klein's title, while toddlers and preteen "twens" are converted into "adult" consumers as they come "on line" at an ever younger age. Thus capitalism in its late consumerist phase postpones its rendezvous with destiny and survives at least another generation or two. The economic bottom line holds even as other values people care about are thrust aside. We sow as individuals what we would not nec-

essarily choose to reap as a community. We are trapped in an individualistic consumer culture in which the public goods that belong to us as citizens are not part of the accounting. The fate of capitalism and the fate of citizens no longer converge.

The trouble faced by democratic society is not simply that it is deprived of the responsible grown-up citizens who are its only legitimate custodians, but that the ethic of infantilization perverts childhood as well, prompting us to treat children instrumentally—not as little beings to be serviced by big capitalism but as themselves little servants of big capitalism. J. M. Barrie's fantasy of Peter Pan is neatly inverted. For Barrie, the dream was for kids never to grow up so that they might be spared the burdens of responsible adulthood: jobs, families, mortgages, and political and moral responsibilities. "I don't want to grow up," exclaimed Peter, fleeing to Neverland. "I don't want to be a man, I want always to be a little boy and to have fun."

Modern merchandisers don't want Peter to grow up either: not to preserve his innocence, however, not to keep him safe from the world of commerce, but to make him their loyal customer, to exploit his separation from mother and family to make him theirs, to prompt him to buy the fun for which his youth once offered him costless access. Fly to Neverland, Peter, where we await you with everything the little boy in you ever wanted—except you have to buy it with grown-up dollars. Or buy it, in that perversion of Neverland fabricated by the Michael Jackson brand, by selling out both the family and innocence. Leave your parents behind, but be sure to bring *your* wallets and corrupted eroticism with you.

To the professional keepers of the infantilist ethos, whose task is nicely euphemized by Gene Del Vecchio as "creating ever-cool," waging the war for the soul of Peter Pan means engaging in a great "battle," a struggle to achieve "the conquest of cool."<sup>36</sup> It is a battle like Peter's with Captain Hook that is "most fierce" in an arena where "children are both increasingly influential and increasingly selective [and] competition is keen." This battle "will be won by the company that best understands kids, their emotional needs, their fantasies, their dreams, their desires. Such knowledge is the mightiest weapon in a marketer's arsenal to win a child's heart."<sup>37</sup> Exit

Peter Pan. Exit sensitive writers like Barrie and Lewis Carroll who capture children in literature to free the imagination of the young everywhere. Enter those whose aim it is to capture children's imagination in order to indenture them to the marketplace: enter Michael Jackson, *Shrek*, Super Mario Bros., Steven Spielberg, Britney Spears, Grand Theft Auto, Kobe Bryant, *American Idol*, and Disney World—kiddie consumerism all dressed up as consumer cool. Peter Pan incarcerated in what Mike Davis once called the "panoptican mall" in the "carceral city."<sup>55</sup> Wendy watching the Home Shopping Network.

The battle is not limited to marketing and markets. Del Vecchio's words manifest not merely an ethos of marketing, but the language of politics made contentious, argumentative, and simplistic; the language of ideology focused on privatization, narcissism, and interest; and the language of tele-religion and commercialized revivalism, construed more and more as a tele-commodity offering shallow solutions to deep problems; all deployed on behalf of the interests of a declining global consumer economy unable to sell the poor what they need (it doesn't pay) but trying desperately to sell the prosperous what they don't need. Infantilization in this instrumentalist form signals the abandonment of Western civilization's understanding (not necessarily shared by earlier cultures) of childhood as a precious legacy, and children—not yet capable of autonomy or self-defense—as ends in themselves whose happiness and well-being are the ultimate object of the public good. Thus, our democracy is little by little corrupted, our republican realm of public goods and public citizens is gradually privatized, and the capitalist economy, once intended to serve democracy and the republican commonweal alike, is bent and soon likely to be broken.

To the disorderly rulers of ancient Athens, the philosopher Socrates once said for justice to prevail you must make kings philosophers or philosophers kings. Today's sophists of marketing offer an analogous if less noble formula: for consumer capitalism to prevail you must make kids consumers or make consumers kids. That is to say, smarten up the kids—"empower" them as spenders; and dumb down the grown-ups, disempower them as citizens. As McNeal puts it, this requires that we

understand that "children are a future market that can be cultivated now so that when children reach market age they can more easily be converted into customers."<sup>56</sup>

In the fashion industry, for example, sellers target "the mother who tries to look 15" at the same time that the kindergarten is "gussed up to look 40"—"an idea makers of children's clothes have creepily endorsed." Says Valerie Steele, director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, "At the same time that you're seeing grown-ups in overalls, you're seeing eight-year-old girls essentially wearing push-up bras."<sup>56</sup> Then there is the burgeoning "retro" market that pushes nostalgia apparel, films, and other commodities both to aging adults who want to recapture their youth, and to young people and teens who think adopting the styles of earlier generations is a really cool way to be young. Retro in effect allows being young to grow old and still stay young.

Google search results over the past several years suggest how successful pop-cultural dumbing down has been. What inquiring minds need to know, according to Google's own figures, which rank Google's most common searches from 2001 to 2005 (see table on pages 22-23), focus on Eminem, Britney Spears, Pamela Anderson, Harry Potter, Janet Jackson, and Paris Hilton. Among what are otherwise exclusively teen celebrity, pop-culture, and sports queries in the top ten set of results (with ninety possible slots), only four speak to a wider world (Nostradamus, Hurricane Katrina, tsunami, and Iraq).

In the movies, the impact of infantilization is even more pronounced (although there are elements of change and even resistance explored below in the final chapter). As the sale of movie tickets declines (as it has over the past several years), Hollywood is ever more dominated by blockbuster films aimed at the elongated thirteen- to thirty-year-old "teen market." As Peter Biskind suggests in his history of Hollywood in the 1970s (paraphrased here by Louis Menand), "around 1967 American filmmaking caught fire and grew up, and then Spielberg and Lucas came along and put out the flames with great deluges of cash generated by junk food for fourteen-year-olds."<sup>57</sup> To take but a single year, of the biggest films of 2004 in terms of ticket sales, four of the top five were aimed at kids: *Shrek 2* at

## GOOGLE 2001-2008 TOP QUERIES

Year	Category	1	2	3	4	5
2001	Men	Nostradamus	Osama bin Laden	Eminem	Michael Jackson	Howard Stern
	Women	Britney Spears	Pamela Anderson	Jennifer Lopez	Madonna	Aaliyah
	Overall*					
2002	Men	Eminem	Brad Pitt	Nelly	2Pac	Vin Diesel
	Women	Jennifer Lopez	Britney Spears	Shakira	Halle Berry	Jennifer Love Hewitt
	Overall*					
2003	Men*					
	Women*					
	Overall	Britney Spears	Harry Potter	Matrix	Shakira	David Beckham
2004	Men	Orlando Bloom	Eminem	Usher	Johnny Depp	Brad Pitt
	Women	Britney Spears	Paris Hilton	Christina Aguilera	Pamela Anderson	Carmen Electra
	Overall	Britney Spears	Paris Hilton	Christina Aguilera	Pamela Anderson	Chat
2005	Men*					
	Women*					
	Overall	Janet Jackson	Hurricane Katrina	Tsunami	Xbox 360	Brad Pitt

\* Data unavailable.

Source: Google Zeitgeist Archive, available at [www.google.com/nl/en/press/zeitgeist/archive.html](http://www.google.com/nl/en/press/zeitgeist/archive.html).

number one, *Spider-Man 2* at number two, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* at number four, and *The Incredibles* at number five. As the following list shows, of the twenty largest-grossing films, at least half are directed at the youth market, and all but Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*—both special cases of grown-ups struggling against the norm from the religious right and the secular left—belong either to the cartoon market (four of the top twelve), the adventure-action-picture youth market, or the girls' market. Three films (including numbers one and two) are sequels to earlier formula hits. Most belong to the category of "event" films which, like *Star Wars* or *Harry Pot-*

6	7	8	9	10
George Harrison	Josh Hartnett	Dale Earnhardt	Bob Marley	Michael Jordan
Kylie Minogue	Shakira	Anne Kournikova	Andrea Thompson	Mariah Carey
Josh Hartnett	Ben Affleck	David Beckham	Ronaldo	Ja Rule
Haidi Klum	Pamela Anderson	Sarah Michelle Geller	Carmen Electra	Anne Kournikova
50 Cent	Iraq	Lord of the Rings	Kobe Bryant	Tour de France
David Beckham	50 Cent	Bob Marley	Justin Timberlake	Michael Jackson
Jennifer Lopez	Angelina Jolie	Avril Lavigne	Beyoncé	Hilary Duff
Games	Carmen Electra	Orlando Bloom	Harry Potter	mp3
Michael Jackson	American Idol	Britney Spears	Angelina Jolie	Harry Potter

ter or *The Matrix*, are designed to reach the largest possible global audience where selling to youth is a prime consideration.

## THE BIGGEST FILMS OF 2004\*\*

- |   |                               |
|---|-------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Shrek 2</i> (DreamWorks)                              | \$441 million in ticket sales |
| 2. <i>Spider-Man 2</i> (Sony)                               | \$374                         |
| 3. <i>The Passion of the Christ</i> (Newmarket)             | \$370                         |
| 4. <i>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban</i> (Warner) | \$250                         |
| 5. <i>The Incredibles*</i> (Disney Pixar)                   | \$237                         |
| 6. <i>The Day After Tomorrow</i> (Fox)                      | \$187                         |
| 7. <i>The Bourne Supremacy</i> (Universal)                  | \$176                         |

8. <i>Shark Tale</i> * (DreamWorks)	\$159
9. <i>I, Robot</i> * (Fox)	\$145
10. <i>Troy</i> (Warner)	\$133
11. <i>National Treasure</i> * (Disney)	\$133
12. <i>The Polar Express</i> * (Warner)	\$124
13. <i>50 First Dates</i> (Sony)	\$121
14. <i>Van Helsing</i> (Universal)	\$121
15. <i>Fahrenheit 9/11</i> (Lions Gate)	\$119
16. <i>Dodgeball</i> (Fox)	\$114
17. <i>The Village</i> (Buena Vista)	\$114
18. <i>The Grudge</i> * (Sony)	\$110
19. <i>Collateral</i> (DreamWorks)	\$101
20. <i>Princess Diaries 2</i> * (Disney)	\$95

The year 2004 is not an anomaly: comparing figures for the top-grossing films from 2001 to 2005, the tendencies are the same.<sup>63</sup>

## 2001

<i>Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone</i>	\$349.5
<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring</i>	\$344.9
<i>Shrek</i>	\$294.6
<i>Monster, Inc.</i>	\$281.6
<i>Rush Hour 2</i>	\$248.9
<i>The Mummy Returns</i>	\$222.2
<i>Pearl Harbor</i>	\$218.4
<i>Ocean's Eleven</i>	\$201.8

## 2002

<i>Spider-Man</i>	\$438.5
<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers</i>	\$368
<i>Star Wars, Episode II: Attack of the Clones</i>	\$327.3
<i>Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets</i>	\$283.8
<i>My Big Fat Greek Wedding</i>	\$261.6
<i>Signs</i>	\$247

<i>Austin Powers in Goldmember</i>	\$230.9
<i>Men in Black II</i>	\$207.4

## 2003

<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King</i>	\$399.4
<i>Finding Nemo</i>	\$359.9
<i>Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl</i>	\$323.5
<i>The Matrix Reloaded</i>	\$298.2
<i>Bruce Almighty</i>	\$257
<i>X2: X-Men United</i>	\$227.7

## 2004

<i>Shrek 2</i>	\$450.4
<i>Spider-Man 2</i>	\$385.3
<i>The Passion of the Christ</i>	\$382.1
<i>Meet the Fockers</i>	\$288
<i>The Incredibles</i>	\$269.8
<i>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban</i>	\$257.3

## 2005 (THROUGH DECEMBER 4)

<i>Star Wars, Episode III: Revenge of the Sith</i>	\$380.3
<i>War of the Worlds</i>	\$234.3
<i>Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire</i>	\$229.3
<i>Wedding Crashers</i>	\$209.1
<i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i>	\$206.4
<i>Batman Begins</i>	\$205.3

The global film scene mimics the American picture. In 2003, the top-grossing film in Argentina, Germany, Mexico, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom was the animated cartoon *Finding Nemo*. Along with *Finding Nemo*, kiddie blockbusters and youth-marketed movies such as *The Matrix Reloaded*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and *Bruce Almighty* prevailed throughout the global marketplace.

Sequels also proliferated. Like children, we increasingly ask of movies and theater "Tell me the story again, please? Now please tell me again!"



This makes for safe marketing, but it also satisfies an unadventurous puerile taste that wishes to be neither surprised nor discomfited. In the winter of 2005, as it learned successfully to track Hollywood's marketing strategies, Broadway offered its public not only the usual menu of musical revivals such as *Chicago*, *La Cage aux Folles*, *Sweet Charity*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*, but a host of dramatic plays that in their time were risk taking, even taboo smashing, but are today drawn from the safe haven of familiarity and past success. (Enjoy the nostalgia of taboos once broken, without riskingly newly breaking them!) These included *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), *On Golden Pond* (1979), *Steel Magnolias* (1987), *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), and *Harlebury* (1984). Were this a tribute to the enduring influence of American dramatic classics, it would be heartening, but in fact it represents the can dramatic cowardice of a commercialized theater sector playing it safe even in the theater zone where you're supposed to play it dangerous.<sup>64</sup>

The movies are a marker not just for theater but for the entire economy. As journalist and critic Lynn Hirschberg has written, "while other countries have interpreted globalism as a chance to reveal their national psyches and circumstances through film, America is more interested in attracting the biggest possible international audience. At Cannes [in 2004], war-torn Croatia was shown through the eye of the director Emir Kusturica, the French elite was exposed in *Look At Me*, the fear of female genital mutilation was depicted in Senegal's *Mooladi*." Meanwhile, Hollywood gave the world a (yes, charming) green fantasy creature called Shrek who returned for another record-breaking appearance later in *Shrek 2*.<sup>65</sup>

The dumbing down of films and the blockbuster approach to filmmaking are not accidental features of an irrational Hollywood storyline, but a conscious decision by studio executives and film producers who understand that to make money their products have to sell worldwide. Back in 1946, a hundred million Americans went to the movies every week (of a population of 160 million), whereas today, only twenty-five million a week go. The number of big screens in America has been contracting for decades. As the domestic market for films shifted to television, rentals, and video-on-demand, the foreign big-screen market became ever more

important. Around 1993, foreign box-office revenue overtook domestic revenue for Hollywood films, and today more than 60 percent of exhibition revenue is from overseas markets.

Hollywood thus needs exportable blockbusters whose primary target "is people with an underdeveloped capacity for deferred gratification; that is, kids."<sup>66</sup> Since increasingly Hollywood has come to depend on customers who see films three or four times or more, these kids—the "tell me the story again" kids referenced above—are ideal customers, along with the new class of re-juveniled adults. Much the same can be said of the Mexican-made soap operas aimed at the American Latino market, "Bollywood" musicals from India's prospering film market looking for an export market (Indian action-adventure tough-guy Salman Khan has been introduced into the United States along with a couple of Bollywood leading ladies), or Madrid's new appetite for global musicals, all of which suggest that the trends in Hollywood and New York have their global counterparts. The fourteen- to thirty-year-old market dominates. It will surprise no one that the hit television show *American Idol* now has its counterpart in the hit show *Indian Idol*.

Infantilization has been Hollywood's adaptive strategy, with the new blockbuster films featuring universal kid features like comic-book action, branded characters, numberless sequels, extensive product placements, and commercial tie-ins with fast food and other global enterprises, minimal plots, and still more minimal dialogue. What is perhaps surprising is that serious films get made at all—like the ones screened in 2005 when mature fare and politically relevant films such as *Brokeback Mountain*, *Capote*, *The Constant Gardener*, *Syriana*, and *Good Night, and Good Luck* dominated the Academy Awards (see chapter 8).

THUS DO GLOBAL marketers around the world, when not explicitly infantilizing adults, engage in the delicate task of empowering children as adult consumers without allowing them to forgo their childish tastes. To do this requires not simply the shaping of fresh advertising and merchandizing strategies, but the reshaping of cultural, educational, and civic institutions to help sustain an ethos favorable to infantilization—the condition for the

selling of uniform commodities the world over. It was once rather common for conservatives to pillory welfare statism for creating childlike dependency in its clients (see Charles Murray for example). Totalitarian states historically were thought to act as overweening authorities which infantilized their subjects to keep them in line. Traditionally, critics have argued that "philanthropists and liberals tend to place themselves in the role of a parent supplying the needs of a helpless child. In doing so they foster the infantilization of the recipients."<sup>67</sup> This was David Jones and Doris Klein's view in their *Mam-Child*, where they complained about the "world-wide trend toward the socialization of all services [as] a further indication that man is placing government in the role of Mother."<sup>68</sup>

Yet if paternalistic states create top-down forms of infantilization, markets today are creating bottom-up forms of infantilization—the less visible because they arise from below out of supposedly pluralistic and competitive markets that turn out to be coercive in intractable ways as they seek to inspire childlike dependency in consumers. Now even democratic models of citizenship are subordinated to parent-child paradigms. The scholarly linguist George Lakoff has recently strayed off the academic reservation to beguile the Democratic Party with a reductive, even demeaning, paradigm of politics that sees in Republican leaders a model of the "strict father" and in Democratic leaders a model of the "nurturant parent" (a politically correct version of the "empathetic mother").<sup>69</sup> This paradigm treats citizens as consumers of government services—needy children in search of parental care.

Even grown-ups who avoid having children or interacting with them seem animated by childish desires. A paradoxical example of the infantlist ethos in action in the marketplace is the movement for "childfree" environments that bar kids from grown-up settings in order to allow adults to "be themselves" and hence to be free. But to be free from what? "Free from brats," ardent advocates say. Actually, free to be brats, it would seem—to conduct themselves without the usual grown-up concerns for and responsibilities toward children, hence to be just like children. Not having children (or being like children) is not "some cute stage" to be grown out of, exclaims a childfree zealot, but is rather "a legitimate life choice."<sup>70</sup> Some

such people—10 percent of voters are childless, though obviously only a few of them belong to the antichild zealots—seek the sanctuary of "Minimum Breeder Quotient neighborhoods" and refer to kids as "anklebiters" and "crib lizards" and to couples as "breeder-yuppie-scum" busy "squirting out spawn."

This is silly stuff, and issues from a tiny "kid backlash" minority. Yet it reveals a telling irony that illuminates trends in the larger society. For the autonomy these people seek from the world of children is marked above all by a narcissistic quest for their own freedom from grown-up responsibility in favor of self-obsessed acquisitiveness.<sup>71</sup> "I'm spending my grandchildren's inheritance!" boasts the popular bumper sticker that can be seen peeling from gas-guzzling recreational vehicles prowling the sunbelt, whose inhabitants happily call themselves "SKlers" (Spending the Kids' Inheritance). Nor is it very hard to find signs of narcissistic kid-baiting in wildly popular American television shows like *Desperate Housewives*. As teen movies often ridicule parents, teachers, and other "adult" authority figures, young-adult fare ridicules and reviles kids—the better to displace them in the hierarchy of narcissism that defines infantilism.<sup>72</sup>

The logic carries all the way down to toddlers and perhaps even fetuses who, once they are deemed alive and human, can be treated as shoppers in potentia as well. Del Vecchio takes the age of four as the cutoff, but others see preverbal children as appropriate targets. There is now a 24/7 cable television channel called BabyFirstTV expressly aimed at six-month- to two-year-olds. There is room enough for Barney babies and Teletubby toddlers in the children's market. As Norma Pecora observes (unlike many of the others, she is a critic), "as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, children are well-trained consumers able to associate Ronald McDonald with good things before they have learned the language."<sup>73</sup> Indeed, according to the Center for a New American Dream, "babies as young as six months of age can form mental images of corporate logos and mascots," which means "brand loyalties can be established as early as age two." It follows that "by the time children head off to school most can recognize hundreds of brand logos."<sup>74</sup> Kids' marketer James McNeal splits the difference, identifying the ideal "kid customer" as "a confident little 9 year old with a cure

little nose and arms full of shopping bags, emerging from a department store . . . confident, a big spender, able to cope in the market place."<sup>75</sup> No wonder that spending on advertising to children increased from less than \$100 million in 1990 to more than \$2 billion in 2000. After all, "kids are the most unsophisticated of all consumers. They have the least and therefore want the most. Consequently, they are in a perfect position to be taken."<sup>76</sup>

Peter Zollo, one of those children's market researchers who seems to salivate as he surveys his research, writes with mocking disdain about the stereotype of today's teen as "a brand-obsessed, label-driven, mall-congregating, free-spending, compulsive shopper." But with a wink and a grin he quickly adds that "there is often some truth to stereotypes." After all (now he is serious), "teen spending is on the rise, and few teens are saddled with payments that inhibit adult spending, like rent, utilities, and groceries. Teens' considerable income is almost exclusively discretionary. They are consumers with a mission: they want to spend on whatever happens to please them. What a compelling target."<sup>77</sup>

It takes more than mere marketing to score a hit on targeted children, however. It requires that the target be separated from its protective environment: that it be uprooted from the homes and habits that initially protect it from predatory marketers and commercial exploitation. Wendy and her brothers, seduced by Peter Pan, flew from home (literally) to escape the overbearing grown-ups who were fixed on seeing them all grow up. Merchandisers entice them from their homes to bring them into an adult consumerist world where their innocence makes them especially vulnerable to commercial blandishments. Liberation here means establishing children's boutiques and Disney and Warner Brothers stores as adult-free zones. It means arranging mall space so that teen and youth shops are on different shopping floors (or wings) so that the young will shop separately from their parents.

Children in earlier totalitarian societies were stripped of familial loyalties and made to serve the party in the name of liberty from "untrustworthy" and "unpatriotic" parents—"Turn your parents in if they are disloyal to the Party!" Today, for trivial economic reasons, children's "gatekeepers" are also confronted and where possible pushed out of the way in the

name of "empowerment"—the need to make children "autonomous" consumers.

Again, these are not philosophical abstractions drawn from the old left cultural critique of capitalism that must be read into the marketplace. It is what marketplace vendors acknowledge, even boast, they are doing. A favorite phrase of the kid marketers is "kid empowerment."<sup>78</sup> Youth marketing conferences favor the term.<sup>79</sup> Although actually enabling only irresponsibility and impulse, marketers offer kiddies a flag of a faux "autonomy" that uses the language of liberation and empowerment to justify making the young more vulnerable to the seductions of commercial predators. In a similar rhetorical gesture, a recently defunct teen catalog company, *Blu Sphere*, wove a rhetoric of "betterment" around its hustling of teen commodities that included clothes, electronics, sports items, and magazine style bibles.

This focus on personal betterment, private liberty, and individual empowerment fosters a potent affiliation between teen marketing and privatization that has been brilliantly exploited by the wildly successful television show *American Idol*, which draws as many as thirty million mostly young viewers to the program by allowing them to vote for winners and losers competing for their support. In a news report that reads like a pro-motion, *New York Times* reporter Alessandra Stanley writes: "Idol," which is watched by parents and children together, gives people a heady but safe sense of empowerment—choice without consequences."<sup>80</sup> Choice without consequences is of course a synonym for disempowerment, but in the new marketing this conflation of consumer games and democratic empowerment is nonetheless everywhere embraced (see chapter 4).

In business lingo, this individuation of choice is "market segmentation" which is portrayed as "consistent with a shift in general consumer patterns from family needs and wants to individual consumption."<sup>81</sup> The child embedded in a family community makes a poor shopper—a disempowered consumer forced to bow to "gatekeepers" like Mom and Dad. But the child liberated through marketing to become a four-year-old "individual" becomes an apt consumer capable even of being an "influencer" over income dispensed by subordinate parents. The child here is autonomous

in a technical sense inasmuch as—with respect to the zone of kids' shopping—it is on its own and free from parental guidance. But in truth its autonomy leaves it vulnerable, unprotected, and susceptible to outside manipulation.

As one might imagine, like the producers of BabyFirstTV and "Baby Einstein," those who prey on the very young and write books with titles like *What Kids Buy* and *Why* parade their academic and expert credentials. Dan Acuff's Ph.D. degree is on the cover of his book to help legitimize his anything but academic mission. Most marketing firms boast sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists on their staffs to give their marketing research the appearance of pure science. Like Dan Acuff, they prattle on about how they are "not just interested in what sells . . . in the bottom line," but are "four-square against" anything that "can be shown in any significant way to be bad for kids."<sup>82</sup> How can empowering and liberating children be bad? BabyFirstTV issued a guidebook "full of approving pediatricians, psychologists and educators" aimed at immunizing its programming against critics; the guidebook itself says television can "enlighten your baby's experience by opening up a world of imagination and images."<sup>83</sup>

Since kid empowerment is a legitimate aim, why not toddler empowerment? In fact, were it not that younger children are more embedded in families and less autonomous in their spending than older children, their impulsiveness and kid qualities would make them even better targets for consumerism than teens, who are already on the way to becoming dissidents and rebels if not yet adults and may have already begun to put away childish things. The young minds of toddlers are less formed, their tastes more vulnerable to manipulation, their wants more easily played with. "Empowering" them (and thereby disempowering their parents and teachers and pastors) is easier to achieve (if harder to justify). A recent Kaiser Family Foundation survey found that half of all four- to six-year-olds have played video games, while the *New York Times* reported 14 percent of toddlers under three had done so. Meanwhile, old-fashioned toys that engage the active imaginations of children are being displaced by computers, electronic games, cell-phones, and iPods.<sup>84</sup> Unsurprisingly, the trend is ration-

alized by free-market video-game enthusiasts such as Steven Johnson who proposes that "everything bad is actually good for" us, but his empirical evidence is paltry (limited mostly to video games).<sup>85</sup>

The World Wide Web in fact targets the very young worldwide, offering four-year-olds easy access and designing many of its game and chat sites for preschoolers. There are to be sure some responsible sites for children. Or sites that offer parents reassuring signs of pedagogical relevance. Road Runner's early 2000's "Kid Stuff" homepage included such features as "Build Your Vocabulary," a "Brain Pop" facts column, and links to videos but also to books and audio tapes of classics such as *Charlotte's Web* and *A Great and Terrible Beauty*. But younger children cannot distinguish advertising from storytelling, or fantasy from fact. And until the federal government finally drew a line in the sandbox (in the spring of 2000) on polling and surveying little children, websites often queried tykes as young as three or four about their family's spending habits and their own buying preferences (that's empowerment!) as a condition of logging on. Unlike in Europe, where government protection of children on the web and elsewhere is commonplace, American market ideology prefers self-policing and other market mechanisms to deal with what only some people think are abuses in the first place.

The misuse of normative terms like *autonomy* and *empowerment* to rationalize selling to children far too young to possess either liberty or judgment (the two key components of real choice or self-determining power) is typical of an infantile ethos that reinforces consumer market ideology by providing corporate predators with an altruistic ethic to rationalize selfish and patently immoral ends. Even Dan Acuff, the happy Ph.D. warrior of marketing cited above, feels constrained to problematize empowerment. He acknowledges that it is not so easy to tell "just what is empowering and what is disempowering" for kids. Having raised the crucial question, however, he quickly eludes it by means of a mindless truism: empowerment is whatever nurtures "positive development" and "disempowerment," whatever furthers "negative development"—keeping in mind that "it's not black and white."<sup>86</sup> Genuine empowerment always treats the person as an end in herself, and is defined by the domain of edu-

cation, not advertising. It is measured by increased capacity to resist manipulation, not increased vulnerability to it. Hence, infantilization is empowerment's antonym.

IN SPEAKING ABOUT infantilization, I have in mind a relationship between infantilism understood in classical developmental psychology as a pathologically arrested stage of emotional development and infantilism understood in cultural psychology as a pathologically regressive stage of consumer market development—the two together comprising what Freud spoke of as “a pathology of cultural communities” on the study of which he hoped one day to embark.<sup>87</sup>

The cultural pathology of late consumer capitalism effectively prioritizes consumerism at the expense of capitalism's traditional balance between production and consumption, work and leisure, and investment and spending. As described in the classical Freudian and neo-Freudian literature, infantile behavior is a consequence of a regressive process that offers itself as a defense against intimidating adult dilemmas with which a disordered ego is unable to contend. Peter Pan's charming narcissism represents the seductive side of regression, while Wendy turns out to be one of those healthy youngsters who is good at growing up, who “grew up of her own free will a day quicker than other girls.”<sup>88</sup>

The infantilism toward which an unhealthy psyche regresses is marked by an inability to distinguish self and world. As Freud concretizes it, “an infant at the breast does not as yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him.”<sup>89</sup> This confusion of “ego and object” initially leads to a bold but ultimately futile attempt either wholly to master the world (ego triumphant), or to merge wholly with that world (object triumphant). Either way, the self tries to erase the as yet unrecognized boundaries between the emerging ego and the object world and remain in that womb-tomb of preindividuated collective identity that offers blanket security immediately before and after birth. What is a passing stage in early child development becomes a pathology when it persists into the period when normal children acknowledge boundaries and direct their psychological and behavioral efforts

toward accommodating themselves to them and coming to terms with what it means to grow up—subordinating id to superego in Freud's language; that is to say, becoming civilized.<sup>90</sup>

In the pathological culture of consumer economics, consumer behavior turns out to be remarkably unaccommodating to civilizing tendencies. It mimics infantile aggressiveness in striking ways. The consumer at once both imbibes the world of products, goods, and things being impressed upon her and so conquers it, and yet is defined via brands, trademarks, and consumer identity by that world. She essays to make the market her own even as it makes her its prisoner. She trumpets her freedom even as she is locked up in the cage of private desire and unrestrained libido. She announces a faux consumer power even as she renounces her real citizen power. The dollars or euros or yen with which she imagines she is mastering the world of material things turn her into a thing defined by the material—from self-defined person into market-defined brand; from autonomous public citizen to heteronomous private shopper (this is the subject of chapter 6). The boundary separating her from what she buys vanishes: she ceases to buy goods as instruments of other ends and instead becomes the goods she buys—a Calvin Klein torrid teen or an Anita Roddick Body Shop urbanite or a politically conscious Benetton rebel or a Crate & Barrel urban homesteader or a plasma television Nike spectator athlete.<sup>91</sup>

The branding game targets consumers, but it also helps erase the boundaries between consumer and what is consumed. In thinking he has conquered the world of things, the consumer is in fact consumed by them. In trying to enlarge himself, he vanishes. His so-called freedom evaporates even as it is named. For it is private rather than public and so seals off the real public consequences of private choices. The gloating Hummer owner may preen with macho pride, unaware or simply uncaring of the fact that he drives an ecological behemoth that squanders fossil fuel resources, pollutes the environment, and makes the United States more dependent than ever on foreign oil resources—contributing quite inadvertently to the justification for Middle East military interventions he otherwise vehemently opposes. *American Idol* “voters” mistake a popularity contest for empower-



ment. The public consequences of private choices are masked by brand-identity consumerism in which only the private preference and its subjective entailments are visible.

The hidden social costs of consumer preferences are in fact notated neither in the consciousness of consumers nor the statistical indices of the U.S. Treasury Department; or for that matter in the records of the World Trade Organization or the International Monetary Fund. The consumer here is radically individuated rather than socially embedded, and less rather than more free as a consequence. She is permitted to choose from a menu of options offered by the world but not to alter or improve the menu or the world. In this, the dynamics of consumption actually render the individual more rather than less vulnerable to control, much in the way that the infant, for all its sense of power, is actually powerless in a world from which it cannot distinguish itself. In short, in almost every way, the full-time consumer as imagined by the aggressive marketing executive ideally acts regressively, more like an impulsive child than an adult.

The citizen, on the other hand, is an adult, a public chooser empowered by social freedom to effect the environment of choice and the agendas by which choices are determined and portrayed; the infantilized consumer is the private chooser, whose power to participate in communities or effect changes is diminished and whose public judgment is attenuated. The infantalist ethos, then, does the necessary work of consumer capitalism, but at the expense of the civilization that productivist capitalism helped create.

CAPITALISM ITSELF HAS come full circle. Originating in an extraordinary synergy between selfishness and altruism, between profit and productivity, it once upon a time allowed energetic and entrepreneurial risk takers to prosper by serving the growth and welfare of emerging nations. It did so with the succor of a Protestant ethos that lent moral weight to hard work, far-sighted investment, and ascetic self-denial—the very qualities productivist capitalism needed to thrive. Today, its productive capacity has outrun the needs it once served even as its distributive capacity has been strymined by the growing global inequalities it has catalyzed. Depending for

its success on consumerism rather than productivity, it has generated an ethos of infantilization that prizes the very attributes the Protestant ethos condemned. It seems quite literally to be consuming itself, leaving democracy in peril and the fate of citizens uncertain. Although it affects to prize and enhance liberty, it leaves liberty's meaning ambiguous in an epoch where shopping seems to have become a more persuasive marker of freedom than voting, and where what we do alone in the mall counts more importantly in shaping our destiny than what we do together in the public square.