

Infantilizing Consumers: The Coming of Kidults

Childhood makes capitalism hum over the long haul.

—Dan Cook¹

THE INFANTILIST ETHOS generates a set of habits, preferences, and attitudes that encourage and legitimate childishness. As with Protestant asceticism in its time, infantilism reflects broad attitudes and general behavior that mirror the age, beyond the specific concerns of capitalism. But it also serves capitalist consumerism directly by nurturing a culture of impetuous consumption necessary to selling puerile goods in a developed world that has few genuine needs. As the earlier ethos helped explain and shape the leadership of capitalist producers such as Jacob Fugger and John D. Rockefeller, but also Bill Gates in our own period, the infantilist ethos helps explain and shape the behavior of capitalism's marketing executives and ardent consumers in our era.

A cultural ethos, whether Protestant or infantilist, cannot be said to have a particular "author," and the linkage between it and the requirements of capitalism is always oblique and informal, although no less efficacious for that. This is to say, it does not result from a silent conspiracy of corporate meddlers and marketing propagandists. Yet it serves

capitalism—in the case of the infantilist ethos, it serves consumerism—in ways that can be quite concretely elucidated. For the ethos is impressively efficient in creating market demand by encouraging the manufacture of faux needs in the affluent world, thereby assuring the sale of all the goods and services capitalism is zealously overproducing. I have depicted the impact of infantilization on our society and on the character of consumer capitalism in general. But what exactly is it? How do its dynamics work to support radical consumerism?

Infantilization aims at inducing puerility in adults and preserving what is childish in children trying to grow up, even as children are “empowered” to consume. What counts as childish is of course measured by norms embodied in the construct of childhood itself, which is less a biological fact than a contrivance of human imagination, “invented” for social, economic, and political purposes. The modern idea of childhood was introduced only in the Renaissance around the time of the rise of Protestantism, and like Protestantism was conditioned to some degree by the printing press and the growth of literacy.² It gained ground in the Enlightenment with the work of writers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau who insisted on the idea of human development (and its defining rationality) as a series of stages in which the young and very young were to be understood not merely as little adults in waiting but as distinctive genus with distinctive developmental and educational needs. In his study positing the vanishing of childhood, social critic Neil Postman observed that it was the idea of childhood that permitted a portrait of the modern idea of adulthood, distinguished by “the characteristics . . . of a fully literate culture: the capacity for self-restraint, a tolerance for delayed gratification, a sophisticated ability to think conceptually and sequentially, a preoccupation with both historical continuity and the future, a high valuation of reason and hierarchical order.”³

Postman is typical of modern psychological and sociological views of child development, which to some degree track the Protestant ethos (self-restraint, delayed gratification, rationality, and order). Playing on child/adult dualisms, this perspective suggests that childishness, in contrast to adulthood, privileges:

IMPULSE over DELIBERATION;
 FEELING over REASON;
 CERTAINTY over UNCERTAINTY;
 DOGMATISM over DOUBT;
 PLAY over WORK;
 PICTURES over WORDS;
 IMAGES over IDEAS;
 PLEASURE over HAPPINESS;
 INSTANT GRATIFICATION over LONG-TERM SATISFACTION;
 EGOTISM over ALTRUISM;
 PRIVATE over PUBLIC;
 NARCISSISM over SOCIABILITY;
 ENTITLEMENT (RIGHT) over OBLIGATION (RESPONSIBILITY);
 THE TIMELESS PRESENT over TEMPORALITY (NOW over PAST and FUTURE);
 THE NEAR over THE REMOTE (INSTANTANEOUS over ENDURING);
 PHYSICAL SEXUALITY over BROTC LOVE;
 INDIVIDUALISM over COMMUNITY;
 IGNORANCE over KNOWLEDGE.

Such an ungainly set of dyads offers a telling psychological landscape, but one more expansive than we can traverse in this spare portrait of the infantilist ethos. That landscape's contours are reduced here to three archetypal dualisms that capture infantilization: EASY over HARD, SIMPLE over COMPLEX, and FAST over SLOW.⁴ As with the stages of capitalist development charted earlier, such stages of psychological development as manifested by these dualisms often tend to intersect and overlap with one another in ways that are more dialectical than dyadic, ways that can conserve what is virtuous and attractive in children while superseding what is merely puerile or (in adults) retarded. In elaborating the child/adult dualism, it is in fact more useful to think about a process, about the triadic rather than the dyadic. To do so is to conceive of plural stages of maturation in which the move from (say) easy to hard or simple to complex or fast to slow takes the form of an evolution in which some-

thing of the child (the easy, the simple, and the fast) is retained and elaborated in the fully evolved adult. Since, as Erik Erikson wisely observed, "every adult . . . was once a child," society has to learn how to "take care of the unavoidable remnants of infantilism in its adults."⁵

Hence, for example, while one might generalize that children prefer the easy way to do things while adults accept and even cultivate the hard and disciplined way, it is more judicious to suggest that truly mature adults supercede easy/hard altogether, and instead achieve something like *fluency*, the seeming ease that comes with extensive learning, effort, and discipline, that consummate skill that makes art and achievement appear effortless. Fluency manifests some of that unself-conscious youthful ease which we prize in children but which in its raw form can morph into sloppiness, laziness, or complaisance, whereas when reproduced by virtue of hard work and purposeful discipline it may reappear in a mature and productive form that moves beyond the obsessive authoritarianism sometimes associated with being grown up. Deploying the language of William Blake, Erik Erikson thus suggests that "the child's toys and the old man's reasons are the fruits of the two seasons." By this he means "the child's play is the infantile form of the human ability to deal with experience by creating model situations and to master reality by experiment and planning."⁶ Adults invent and create by transforming child's play into a grown-up tool, which is an aspect of what artists do, for example.

In the same vein, while it is inviting to suppose that children often prefer fast, while adults appreciate the virtues of slow, it is probably more accurate to attribute maturity neither to the rabbit nor the hare but to the owl who is deliberate when necessary but can also pounce like the hawk. Deliberateness is not ponderousness but a prudent pace of the kind captured by the phrase "proceed with all deliberate speed." The same is true for many of the other dualisms referenced here: where children are characterized by a kind of anarchic spirit of liberation which is not at all the same as adult autonomy (think of Peter Pan), the absence of such anarchic liberty need not be what Peter Pan feared would turn out to be adult servitude or what the philosophers call heteronomy (being morally ruled by others), but can be moral autonomy—the use of freedom to choose the

purposeful and the good. This is the kind of disciplined liberty Kant and Rousseau associate with free moral willing. Unlike childish license, adult moral autonomy is neither anarchic nor authoritarian but both purposive and common, a foundation J. M. Barrie's Wendy (in *Peter Pan*) seemed to appreciate was associated with growing up and having her own family. It was this foundation that Rousseau suggested created the conditions for democratic self-rule.

In this more dialectical spirit, children may be said to be playful (playfulness without purpose), young adults earnest (purposefulness without play), while fully mature adults can achieve that disciplining of playfulness by purpose that we associate with artistry—as Erikson has argued, using play as adults to help "master reality." Children are innocent by virtue of their ignorance, young adults knowledgeable and informed without necessarily being wise (and so beyond innocence without yet being good), while fully mature adults are wise in that they can use knowledge and experience to become capable of informed ethical judgment. Childhood tends to treat "truth" absolutely, even dogmatically, while doubt and uncertainty characterize skeptical young-adult understandings of the world. Yet the doubt that follows dogmatism in a maturing intelligence can in time issue in a renewed and tolerant belief, but one which, more universal and acknowledging (sometimes even encompassing) of other belief systems, espouses faith anew without reembracing dogmatism. This is perhaps one difference between the kind of dogmatic, fundamentalist faith that can be characterized as infantilizing, and mature faith that has weathered self-reflection and critical doubt.

This more dialectical approach helps explain how certain features of childhood impact on adult culture, not by being conserved in their original form, but by being transformed and reintegrated into mature behavior in a fashion that retains the virtues of the childlike in a mature adult setting. Such dialectical complexity needs to stand in the background of our analysis here.

Nonetheless, because my aim here is to understand the nature, causes, and consequences of infantilization—of puerility and childishness—in catalyzing and reinforcing consumerist behavior, rather than to offer a full-

blown, dialectical account of developmental psychology. I will focus on the trio of closely associated pairs introduced above: the easy over the hard, the simple over the complex, and the fast over the slow. In doing so, I will treat civilization a little simplistically, even reductively, as the culture of grown-ups in general; and I will identify the ethos of consumer capitalism in decline with the cultivation of childishness in the broadest sense.

EASY over HARD

To say the infantalist ethos prefers easy over hard is actually also to say the young are naturally drawn to what is simple rather than what is complex and what is fast rather than what is slow. Easy versus hard acts as a template for much of what distinguishes the childish from the adult. Phrases such as "easy listening," "shopping made easy," "easy (appropriate for ages 2-8) games," and a person of "easy morals" push and promote commercial products tailored to the attention span and tastes of the young. Easy in the realm of happiness supposes simple pleasures trump complex ones, whereas spiritual and moral leaders have generally made the opposite case.

The preference for easy plays off of modern utilitarian ideas. Traditional ethics (in Aristotle, Augustine, or Kant, for example) distinguished higher and lower forms of pleasure and presumed that what gave pleasure might not always be identical with what was good. But modern ethical utilitarianism of the kind found in philosophers like David Hume and Jeremy Bentham tried to subordinate "the good" to what was merely pleasurable and then to simplify and reduce pleasure to elementary physical stimulation. It made no distinctions between kinds of pleasure (or pain), assuming that happiness depended merely on maximizing elementary pleasure and minimizing elementary pain for the greatest number of people. This permitted Bentham at the beginning of the nineteenth century to offer a useful if simplistic "felicific calculus" that associated all human behavior and all human ethics with simple, easy-to-measure indicators of elementary pleasure and pain. The good was what *felt* good. What felt good was pleasure's presence and the absence of pain as measured by the lowest common denominator of sense experience. Happi-

ness was quantifiable. How intense was it? How long did it last? How soon would it come? How certain was its realization? But this meant the child's easy pleasure (to take a Freudian example) in playing with his own excitement was simply another (largely indistinguishable) example of the kind of reductive pleasure an adult might find in playing the flute in an Afro-Caribbean rock band.

Jeremy Bentham's own student John Stuart Mill rebelled against such simplifications and insisted that pleasures had to be qualified, that there were *kinds* of pleasure, some worth more than others, some easy, others harder, some simple, others more complex, some childish, one might say, and some more grown-up. Not all pleasures were immediately commensurable with one another: like apples and oranges, or feces and flutes, they were distinguished by quality as well as quantity. Some were to be preferred to others because they offered "higher" pleasures won at the cost of harder work and more disciplined effort and yielding more complex and satisfying kinds of happiness. On Mill's scale, like Aristotle's, the pleasures of the hard and complex trump the pleasures of the easy and the simple. In his celebrated aphorism, poetry was preferable to pushpin, because happiness required embracing the Epicurean mandate to "exchange easier for more difficult pleasure" since "difficult pleasures are more rewarding."⁷

These features of modern utilitarianism with its roots in psychological "pleasure-pain" hedonism are worth noting because they suggest that infantilism has assimilated the utilitarian and instrumentalist inclinations of the age and used them to rationalize supposed "virtues" of puerility. The tensions between easy and hard have challenged every society, but ours is perhaps the first in which the adult institutions of a civilization were to be on the side of easy. Ours rewards the easy and penalizes the hard. It promises profits for life to those who cut corners and simplify the complex at every turn. Weight loss without exercise, marriage without commitment, painting or piano by the numbers without practice or discipline, internet "college degrees" without course work or learning, athletic success through steroids and showboating. In the realm of foreign policy, President Bush's high-minded global strategy of liberty shares in the ethos of easy, comprised by words without consequences: war without con-

scription, idealism without taxation, morality without sacrifice, and virtue without effort. The very opposite of a Protestant ethos: not "no pain, no gain," but "all gain, no pain." An infantile dream-view of the world in which saying "I want it to be so" is enough to make it so; in which, critic Slavoj Žižek has pointedly remarked, the consumer market offers products that make choice easy—"products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol . . . virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of war with no casualties (on our side, of course) as war without war, the redefinition of politics as expert administration as politics without politics."⁸

Lying, cheating, and deception (especially self-deception) are features of the human condition, but they become more acceptable today in part because they are seen as a justifiable form of taking the easy way. How much easier to set sports records and achieve athletic celebrity with steroids than without. The widespread use of performance-enhancing drugs has been disclosed by the media, and addressed by Congress, but though the new rules for baseball mandating a fifty-game suspension for proven use are stiffer than the old (along the lines of a ten-day suspension for first offense, up to a sixty-day suspension for the third, and so on), the record books have not been modified to reflect earlier drug use. How much easier to lie about drug use when asked than confess the truth. Even athletes caught in flagrant delicto have persisted in lying. Baseball player Rafael Palmeiro addressed congressional hearings on steroid use with the flat denial "I have never used steroids, period,"⁹ just months before he tested positive for steroid use.

Students too find it easy and wholly defensible to cheat on tests and plagiarize term papers. "On most campuses, 70% of students admit to some cheating."¹⁰ With plagiarism, the issue is no longer that it is common, or that numerous websites offer term papers for sale, but that many students are unable to see what is wrong with it. Among the dozens of websites offering fully written and ready-to-submit essays, term papers, theses, and (1) "doctoral dissertations" is the company Best Custom Term Papers, whose web ad carries the remarkable header "100% Non-Plagiarized Custom Term Papers." By which the company presumably means it has not

plagiarized its offering, so that the student purchasing it can be sure that there is only *one* plagiarist involved!¹¹

With producers intent on rationalizing intellectual theft on behalf of their customers, and grown-up writers and scholars fuzzy about the meaning of intellectual property (especially in an age of postmodern literary criticism where texts are commodities supposedly belonging as much to those who consume them as those who produce them), it is little wonder that students find plagiarism so easy to indulge in—hardly even of sufficient importance by the loose standards of larceny to warrant forgiveness. After all, borrowing language or forgetting to reference other scholars' work has not significantly damaged a number of well-known historians' reputations any more than contriving facts and experience in a drug and prison memoir did major damage to the sales of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, not at least until Frey received a crushing on-the-air rebuke from celebrity "critic" Oprah (who when Frey's malfeasance was first exposed, initially supported him). Journalists at *The New Republic* and the *New York Times* made large reputations on the basis of wholly fabricated "news" stories, where they seemed (without success) to have to work harder at getting caught than they did at composing their entertaining fictions.

Unlike more traditional societies, ours makes many things that ought to be hard, easy, such as acquiring a gun or a spouse. It is easier to get a marriage license than a driver's license and about as easy to get divorced as to get married. That half of all marriages end in divorce has at least something to do with the narcissistically puerile and irresponsible attitudes that people bring to marriage and to divorce, and of course to the children their marriages produce. Prudent ideas such as covenant marriage, which makes it harder to get married in the hope that people will find it less easy to get divorced, have had strong advocates but few followers outside the mostly Christian communities where the idea has been endorsed.¹²

It is also easier in a generic sense to watch than to do, easier to watch television, where the imagination is more passive, than to read books, where the imagination must be activated, easier to masturbate than estab-

lish relationships within which reciprocal sexuality and interpersonal sensuality are a healthy part, easier to maintain a sexual relationship that is discretionary and capricious than one involving commitment. In sum it's easier to be a kid than a grown-up, easier to play than to work, easier to push aside than to assume responsibility. This is not a fustian conservative point (although conservatives have perhaps understood it better than others). Call it Aristotelian or even utilitarian in John Stuart Mill's version. For what is being argued is that on every count, what is easy may also turn out to be less gratifying, hampering rather than furthering human happiness. But this is a lesson that only adults learn—after they have been helped by parents, schools, church, and society to grow up. Under the cultural sway of infantilization this lesson is made to seem rigid and Puritanical, the preserve of people who are hostile to happiness.

SIMPLE over COMPLEX

As an entailment of its preference for easy over hard, then, the infantilist ethos also prefers the simple over the complex. Simplicity has a sweetness all its own, but adult civilizations are generally defined by their capacity to embrace nuance and complexity in their thinking and behavior, even where decision making may ultimately require reaching a conclusion that puts aside nuance.¹³ Complexity avoids simplistic dualisms, and looks for shades of gray. Scales of moral complexity such as the one postulated by the late Harvard experimental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg rank complexity of thinking and the ability to shade as features of a more developed moral sense. Carol Gilligan has shown that the moral voice of women may be defined by a still greater complexity and sensitivity to context, one that moves beyond Kohlberg's own perhaps too gendered dualisms.¹⁴

Philosophers and scientists often explain and elaborate the meaning of life itself, along with the consciousness in which life issues, in terms of a widening and deepening spiral of complexity: subatomic particles and force fields constitute atomic particles like electrons and protons which in turn constitute atoms and molecules which constitute the complex atomic elements that constitute molecular matter; matter is made more complex

yet as it becomes organic matter; organic matter assumes still greater complexity on its way to becoming life; and life at its most complex yields consciousness, reflection, and then self-consciousness and self-reflection. We are beings defined by the very complexity by which we understand ourselves as being complex. Yet this very complexity contains a defining simplicity that speaks to the dialectics of these dualisms. Complexity entails "the spontaneous self-organizing dynamics of the world," writes science commentator M. Mitchell Waldrop. Summing up the science literature, he notes that "complexity, adaptation, upheavals at the edge of chaos [are themes] . . . so striking that a growing number of scientists are convinced . . . [they point to] an underlying unity, a common theoretical framework for complexity that would illuminate nature and humankind alike."¹⁵

Complexity defies the reductive principles by which we might insist our essence is defined by water or mere atoms since our bodies are 98 percent water or 100 percent molecular; for it is precisely in how they arrange themselves that some molecules end up constituting living consciousness and others the petrified stones or swirling plasma or the hydrogen, oxygen, and carbon molecules from which all conscious, living matter comes and to which it can all be reduced. The association of complexity with nature adulthood and civilization, and of simplicity with childhood, is everywhere evidenced today in the commercial marketplace. Consumerism reduces identity to its own commercial behaviors and leads to an identitarian psychology in which quite literally we "are what we buy"—we are the brands we consume (chapter 5). Shopping and consuming are not an aspect of behavior but define the meaning of life.

The preference for the simple over the complex is evident in domains dominated by simpler tastes—fast food and moronic movies, revved-up spectator sports and dumbed-down video games, for example, all of which are linked in a nexus of consumer merchandizing that the infantilist ethos nurtures and promotes. Many of those lionized and rewarded by commercial culture today, heroes to the child consumers who are prime targets of marketing, are themselves behaving like the kids for whom they are supposedly role models. In an acute and quite astonishing *New Yorker*

profile of the celebrated basketball player Shaquille O'Neal (at the time still the strongman of the then indomitable Los Angeles Lakers), Rebecca Mead describes how "American culture is increasingly geared to the tastes of teen-age boys" by showing how Shaq lives the life of an unformed teen, utterly secure in the "simplicity of his tastes." She shows how in "many ways his life style is a thirteen-year-old's fantasy existence," how he "has surrounded himself with cousins from Newark and old friends from high school, who share his interests in goofing off, breaking stuff, making noise, shooting guns, and driving a wide range of motorized vehicles." She introduces us to a buddy in the posse which envelops him like a childhood security blanket: he recalls with boyish glee the "food fights, where Thomas, the chef, will come in from the grocery store with all these things, and Shaquille will break a whole watermelon over my head, and I'll hit him with a pudding cake." Shaq keeps a huge video collection ready for his extensive TV watching, including the whole Little Rascals series and countless Kung Fu movies. His friend recounts how "Shaquille likes to wake me up with a pillow smash to the face. You know how you get to being sound asleep, and someone smashes you in the face with a pillow? It's so funny."¹⁶

Is it? Maybe at thirteen, but Shaq was over thirty at the time. He is, however, working in a sports culture that prefers its athletes to be foolish playboys. When Shaq celebrated his thirtieth birthday party with red balloons at the foot of his driveway, a red carpet with Superman logos projected in spinning light in his living room, long tubular balloons in red and yellow and blue as decoration, and a cake with O'Neal depicted as Superman as the party's climax, he was acting out a role the corporation that employed him helped design and perfect.¹⁷

Mead reaches exactly this conclusion from her observations about O'Neal: "Basketball itself is marketed with teen tastes in mind. The theatre of a Lakers game has an adolescent-boy aesthetic: goofy and overheated . . . whirling spotlights . . . high-fiving; the snippets of roaring rap music and of the teenboy anthem 'We Will Rock You' by Queen."¹⁸ If John Stuart Mill with his Aristotelian sense of complexity preferred "poetry to pushpin," America today has been induced to prefer the new hot-dogging

star-centered basketball of precocious high-school players to the old, team-centered basketball of defense-minded coaches where experience counted and skill meant more than razzle-dazzle. A simple rather than a complex game. No wonder youth-obsessed film industry celebrities sit courtside in New York and Los Angeles, and even seemingly grown-up stars such as Spike Lee and Jack Nicholson decorate "celebrity row" on both coasts, seen at NBA games with the same regularity that athletes appear in juvenile movies and on rock albums.

Basketball in its new simplified, high-speed, offense-minded form is only the most popular and perhaps global of the many sports that in their commercial incarnation today both benefit from and reinforce the infantilizing inclinations of the current corporate ethos. Sports in the commercial setting offer insistent consumables that demand and are reinforced by infantilization—whether it is of thuggish soccer fans in England hypocritically condemned by the owners who sometimes seem to welcome if not actually incite their behaviors, or of twenty- or thirty-something television viewers in the United States wooed by goofy beer ads targeting their puerile fantasies and encouraging their teen taste tendencies. While there are certainly athletes like NBA players Bill Russell and Michael Jordan from earlier eras and Channing Frye or Steve Nash today¹⁹ who whatever their age are thoughtful and grown-up, able to treat their sport as an adult profession, this is not apparently what the companies that have transformed athletics into pure circus entertainment have in mind: the norm is increasingly the infantilized athlete controlled by the supposedly adult corporate owner indulging in infantilizing tactics in the name of the bottom line. As ever before, the excuse is "we are only giving people what they want."

Former Philadelphia Eagles running back Terrell Owens was eventually run off his team for unprofessional behavior that included insulting his quarterback Donovan McNabb. Yet his juvenile antics were tolerated for years on a succession of teams, and while there was much tut-tutting about his unprofessional media-pandering, it was Monday Night Football that arranged for him to do a pregame skit with television's *Desperate Housewives* actress Nicollette Sheridan, who appeared in the Eagles locker

room wearing only a towel.²⁰ The various professional associations make a fetish out of applying tough rules against recalcitrant players, but tolerate and benefit from media-mongering player behaviors that increase the audience for their sports and enhance the revenue for their member teams.²¹

Yet it seems apparent that the corporations that control spectator sports manipulate the game and its environment to maximize consumer sales, giving people not what they want but what they want them to want. Basketball games are forty-eight minutes long, which does not allow much time for affiliated commerce (beer, banners, peanuts, and popcorn for starters, and then the blaring ads and MTV music), so time-outs which "officially" last sixty seconds are allowed to run for minutes at a time, leaving the television advertisers plenty of time as well. A three-quarter-of-an-hour game can last several hours nowadays. In college basketball, even during the NCAA tournament Final Four games, the time-outs actually end after sixty seconds and the games stretch out into eternity only when they are televised.

It is not just basketball. *New York Times* sportswriter William Berling gives a startling portrait of a typical baseball-club locker room that makes "the boys of summer" a study in literalism and suggests Rebecca Mead's description of Shaq is typical of sports in general rather than specific to basketball or to Shaq. The *New York Mers* baseball-team clubhouse, designed to "help the players relax and bond," Berling reports, is "a cross between a frat house rumpus room and a Chuck E. Cheese's." It is a place where players hang out "in the windowless rooms, in which the air-conditioning is always on full-blast, the flickering blue lights give the players a pasty, somewhat sickly aspect as they watch TV, play John Madden's video football on Nintendo 64, read tabloids, get massages and eat."²²

Sports today, with its preference for fast and simple over slow and complex, discloses the ambiguity of an infantilist ethos that dumbs down adults even as it accelerates the maturation of children into "empowered" consumers. Adult athletes are treated like children and behave accordingly; children are pushed to grow up into profit-generating "adult" athletes as fast as possible, regardless of the consequences to their bodies or

their spirits. More and more often, star athletes skip college to join their chosen professional teams right out of high school. Where children's play was once a vital domain of spontaneous activity in which the young had fun while developing their bodies through a variety of physical endeavors from tree climbing and hopscotch to stickball and tag, it is fast becoming preprofessional training ground for commercialized professional sports. As Michael Sokolove has written, "Left on their own, children are natural cross-trainers. They climb trees, wade in streams, play whatever sport is in season and make up their own games."²³ But the early specialization foisted on them by commerce makes them less fit—"one-trick ponies" as Brendan Sullivan, director of Headfirst Baseball, calls them,²⁴ at greater risk of injury and cut off from the playful aspects of sport that traditionally afford purposeless pleasure.

The infantilist ethos works in a purposefully contradictory manner—pushing kids to grow up fast into professional profit-turning athletes who can then reembrace the childishness their professionalization compelled them to abandon. The trained teen is the perfect marketing target: old and disciplined enough to spend, and sufficiently conditioned to make music or movies or athletic moves—but young enough to embody the puerile taste required to generate global consumer needs. Ironically, where once top-down authoritarian societies imposed professional sports training on juveniles in places like East Germany and the Soviet Union, today it is free-market societies that do much the same bottom up, motivated less by national or ideological hubris than economic greed.

Sports, like entertainment generally, is an obvious but hardly the only domain where simple trumps complex. The transformation of hard news into soft news, and soft news into infotainment, is an old story made worse by talk radio and cable television, neither of which owe anything to broadcasting's once weighty civic standards. Journalist Michael Massing recently asked whether "The End of News" was impending, in the first of two articles for the *New York Review of Books*. Yet iconic broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow's polemic against the loss of autonomy and integrity on broadcast news (memorialized in the recent film *Good Night, and Good Luck*) is sixty years old, suggesting that the infantilizing of broadcasting is

not exactly a novel development. Cable news has, however, accelerated the dumbing down, creating what Massing has called the "Fox effect" (after Rupert Murdoch's Fox News approach) which is visible throughout the industry.²⁵ The Sinclair Broadcasting Group, which controls sixty-plus stations with access to as much as a quarter of the American television-viewing audience, notoriously instructed its eight ABC affiliates not to run a Ted Koppel *Nightline* segment on which Koppel read the names of the one thousand Americans (the number is now approaching three thousand) killed in Iraq. Too hard for viewers to deal with, and perhaps also in keeping with "the various steps the administration has taken to suppress coverage of US casualties."²⁶ Even in serious newspapers, complex issues are increasingly marginalized. The *Los Angeles Times* no longer has a labor news reporter, nor anyone specializing in issues of poverty.²⁷

Most newspapers are losing money, and finding it more and more difficult to compete with television and the internet, which are in turn finding it increasingly tricky to accommodate hard news. PBS begins to look like CNN, while CNN looks more like Fox, even as Fox turns into ET (Entertainment Tonight), each of them drifting away from the adult standards by which they once defined themselves. In a hilarious but distressing interview with former Clinton staffer Paul Begala and conservative journalist Tucker Carlson on the (now defunct) television show *Crossfire*—a purportedly serious political opinion forum whose very title indicates how far from complexity and nuance television news has come—the Comedy Central Network comic Jon Stewart reminded his hosts that they were supposed to be more than political hacks.²⁸ When a comedian has to remind serious journalists of their responsibilities, the bottom is falling out of serious broadcast journalism.

Learning and growing are hard; they always feel in the first instance like you are losing something. Remaining ignorant and youthful is easy; it requires nothing but indulging the pleasure principle. For the merchandiser this does not mean taking pleasure in the child's play but taking profit from the child's pleasure. For simple pleasures entail big-time profits. As Erica Gruen (then a Saatchi & Saatchi Interactive researcher) noticed, what is called the "lucrative cyberrot category"—kiddies on the

web—offers a "medium for advertisers that is unprecedented. . . . [T]here's probably no other product or service that we can think of that is like it in terms of capturing kids' interest," precisely because when kids go on-line, they enter the "flow state," that "highly pleasurable experience of total absorption in a challenging activity" which means "there is nothing else that exists like it for advertisers to build relationships with kids."²⁹

FAST over SLOW

The preference for easy over hard and simple over complex issues naturally in a preference for fast over slow. The world of kids is a hare's civilization in which tortoises have no place. It has been seventy-five years since philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote *In Praise of Idleness*, and since that time the "pleasure of slowness," Milan Kundera observed not long ago, "has disappeared." Kundera proposes that "speed is the form of ecstasy the technological revolution has bestowed upon man,"³⁰ and ecstasy, like speed (the eponymous drug for people who think they are cool), is a specialty of the young. Kundera makes technology the culprit, but technology is always a tool, and while it has features that catalyze speed, speed is something the infantile ethos demands from both technology and capitalism. Fast food, fast music, fast film-editing, fast computers, athleticism in which speed alone counts, digitalization where speed is the primary objective, the fast-track life (even where it is actually a no-growth road to nowhere)—these are the ever more embedded trends that dominate popular youth culture and commerce worldwide. In India, the new generation of fast consumers call themselves "Zippies."

James Gleick, who writes about speed, observes that the modern Olympics reflect "an obsession with time that is more finely grained and intense than ever in human history. It has a weird effect on the Olympics. The Games themselves have been twisted by our obsession with time and our control of it."³¹ Gleick's study of speed rests on the premise that "the modern economy lives and dies by precision in time's measurement and efficiency in its employment." Business is always making "a grab for a few extra seconds of your time. . . . With fast ovens, quick playback, quick

freezing, and fast credit."³² Fast translates into instantaneity which, Gleick observes, "rules in the network and in our emotional lives: instant coffee, instant intimacy, instant replay, and," bringing us back to what is perhaps infantilization's greatest departure from the Protestant ethos, "instant gratification."³³

In a more recent book about "thinking without thinking" called *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell tells us that snap judgments and instant impressions carry both dangers and utilities. Although Gladwell argues that lightning judgments and first impressions may actually represent mental shortcuts rooted in slowly accumulated experience—something akin to wisdom—the first impression the book itself leaves behind is one of fascination with instantaneity, a catering to the pop-cultural vitality of the idea of speed.³⁴ "Insta-books" are in fact ever more common in the publishing industry, where a record of sorts must have been set in 2006, when an insta-book about Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt of more than two hundred pages was written in just one week.³⁵

Fast edits and jump cuts in films and videos as well as the instant pop-up ads that blitz the internet all exhibit the same frenzied obsession with speed. Compare Hollywood films of the 1930s where scenes could last for tens of seconds or even a full minute without a single edit or change in camera angle with today's music videos and comic-book and digital-action films where no scene lasts more than a second or two without a snip here and an edit there. In today's film and video, multiple jump cuts per second are the norm for hyperactive directorial control freaks among whom faster has become a form of cinematic tyranny, imagining as they do that youthful audiences saddled with their media-induced attention deficits crave such speed—even as they themselves reinforce the addictive tendencies. Speed is a drug like any other that must be taken in ever higher doses just to maintain its hold over the psyche.

Digitalization encourages and facilitates both speed and nonlinearity, the latter a kind of artificial rupture in temporality in which our "normal" linear experience of time is deconstructed into nonsequential fragments. Ruptures in temporality may well catalyze art and creative innovation, to be sure (the Best Picture Oscar-winning film *Crash* is an example), but are

corrupting to normal consciousness and to responsible and predictable behavior of the kind traditionally associated with mature adulthood.

Seen from the perspective of adulthood, speed has become the paramount modern form of youthful vanity: time whipped, time mastered, time accelerated, time overcome. Whether in teen film series starting with *Terminator*, *Back to the Future*, or the *Matrix* trilogy through recent series such as *Final Destination* and *X-Men*, or through electronic devices permitting "time shifting" of television and cable programming (TiVo) and music listening (iPods), we are now hurried time travelers as malcontent with the idea that "now" can contain our anarchic temporality as we are with the idea that a particular space can contain our spastic bodies (as our gadgets liberate us from fixed spaces). All the small luxuries of our slow yesterday's youth for which pace defined virtue—oatmeal, chess, mashed potatoes, love letters—are now available quicktime: not just fast but instant, from instant to blitz chess and instant messaging (Gleick's instantaneity). What is the message of instant messaging with its abbreviated happy-/sad-face emoticons, its inventive contractions, and its furious pace, other than the message of being in a hurry? Kids will instant message for hours as if they have but seconds; the mad seconds accumulate, leaving them plenty of time to compose sonnets: but they content themselves with sentence fragments. For the person on the other end is waiting, and probably multitasking and might go away any sec now, and time's a flying, so hurry up!

With the perceived victory over time comes the illusion of victory over death—not just the would-be magic of cosmetic surgery and the promised immortality of cryonics but the total liberation from time that comes with instantaneity: ceaseless instant change, change so fast that it bypasses every terminus and overshoots the stop signs that might otherwise signal death's approach. Shopping itself partakes of the illusion that time can stand still or vanish completely: clocks are never seen at the mall (nor in casinos), where vendors hope shoppers will feel as though time is standing still while they shop or gamble. Fast food means eating (fueling up) is almost instantaneous: "Consciousness consumption stems from a fear of death" concludes a dour trio of sociologists—with "shop till you drop"

both an exultant boast and a reminder of what can happen if shopping is ever allowed to end.⁵⁶

Video games too depend on rapid neurological response and instant reaction to stimuli. Such games are intrinsically tied to the perpetuation of childhood and represent one of the most successful sectors of merchandizing to children and turning adults into consumers of children's commodities (more on this below). But even as measured by speed alone, intelligence in the world of digital games is associated with the rapid firing of extant synapses rather than the forging of new synapses that constitutes traditional associative intelligence (putting together and making sense out of the raw information generated by fast neurons). Where once intelligence was equated with wisdom and deliberation, with the deliberate privileging of slowness and the intentional expenditure of time's wealth, today smart is too often about quick. To be counted as bright, you have to be a quick study, reach conclusions in the blink of an eye, short-circuit the deliberative process (boring!), and cut to the quick. College and Law Board exams, like all modern tests, are timed—a recent proposal to make them open-ended was quickly shot down.

Making a virtue of what seems to have become a necessity, we have our own modern Panglosses to reassure Candide that speed is good. Steven Johnson regards our fast-moving video-game planet as the best of all possible worlds in which everything bad is actually good for you. He initially proposes that succeeding in interactive video games takes time and hard work, just the way the old Protestant ethic said good things should. Earning the goods needed to go to the next level "takes time—a lot of time." Except, as Johnson also acknowledges, "you can buy a magic sword or a plot of land—entirely made of digital code—for hundreds of dollars on eBay,"⁵⁷ and thus circumvent time and hard work altogether. That's the new technology, a fool's tool with which you can buy time—in order to circumvent time and with the hours "saved" rush on to victory or more shopping.

Nowhere is the acceleration of time more apparent than in the domain of "news." If news is what is new, in an era of high-speed happenings only the "latest" and "newest" count as truly new. News cycles that lasted weeks

and fortnights in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when monthlies reported happenings messengered by stagecoach and steamboat at a leisurely lunar pace, have progressed in the same ponderous but sure way that compound interest accumulates. In the first half of the twentieth century, when daily news cycles were being driven by the telegraph and news ticker and wire services, and newspaper dailies took over from weeklies, the pace took off. In the last half century, hours, minutes, and seconds have come to dominate the now clichéd 24/7 news cycle in which instant communication and media digitalization that move literally at the speed of light give cable news networks and the internet (to which traditional print media are fast migrating) their powerful but deeply counterproductive edge.

Fast here is by no means better or even particularly appropriate. The news cycle now moves faster than the news, with twenty-four-hour-a-day cable services and blogs demanding more content than the lumbering real world can provide. "The Pope is dead" is but a single news item which more or less speaks for itself, and needs no reiteration. Which means the real story must be surrounded by a shroud of faux stories: "The Pope will (one day) die, what then?" And "The Pope is sick, he might actually be dying." And "The Pope is dying." And "The Pope is nearly dead." Then "The Pope hasn't died yet, after all!" Then "But now he *really* is dying. Really." And afterward, "How the Pope died," and "The Pope died a week ago," and "A new Pope will be chosen by the Papal Conclave." And finally, "How long before the new Pope dies?" With the news cycle outracing the news, the news must recycle the few legitimate "big stories" it has, rerunning the stomach-churning images of the fire/demonstration/trial/accident/election/shooting/indictment/murder/resignation/plague/funeral/coup all day or for days (weeks) at a time. Natural disasters (Katrina or the Indian Ocean tsunami), human disasters (Princess Diana dead, the Pope dead, Terri Schiavo dead, the Kyoto global warming treaty dead), celebrity trials (O. J. Simpson, Scott Peterson, Michael Jackson, fill in today's "blank") can quite literally fill weeks of programming—all aimed at the grown-up kidults whom the marketplace has targeted and whose wanton attentions can only make them, despite their natural gifts

and proclivities, attention deprived and intellectually challenged.

Indeed, according to a *New York Times Magazine* writer (he ought to know!), the 24/7 news cycle, generating "much more news and much faster news," has helped create "a kind of widespread attention deficit disorder" in which new is trumped by newer, and newer superceded by newest, which—instantly superceded—becomes not the news but "what Russell Baker calls 'the olds.'"³⁸ Once news outruns the natural progression of our lives, it must be invented or rehearsed. Repetition cast as invention (news flash: study reveals teen girls do less well in school because they are obsessed with boys!), and repetition fully acknowledged (. . . on the anniversary of 9/11, the beginning of the Peterson trial, the end of the Peterson trial . . .), dominate the unending hours in which the video clips are run and rerun until the most excruciating images turn into irritating clichés.³⁹

Speed has killed news and corrupted telecommunications more generally as it defines the supposed virtues of wireless phones, BlackBerry communicators, and the internet. These forms of communication put us in touch instantaneously with people removed from our sociophysical environment, but remove us from the social spaces in which we physically exist. In this they contribute to the annihilation of public space already underway: The image of cell-phone users falling into a private world with their cell partners, and thereby turning open spaces into private living and bed rooms and literally eclipsing public space, is not some hysterical public citizen's nightmare; it was a ubiquitous cell-phone company advertisement that ran for months on television at the start of 2006. The ability to jump from one person to another, whether on email, instant messaging, the cell-phone, or call-waiting, can detract from the kind of serious one-on-one relationships that demand time, continuity of attention, and commitment. Speed here means shallow, superficial, forgettable, meaningless. A kid's game. No wonder these new "instant communication technologies" are for the most part shunned by the elderly who are deeply immersed in relationships and have no need to hasten the slow walk to oblivion, even as the very same technologies are adored by the young seeking to find or change relationships of which they have yet to learn the value.

With so much current commercial activity representing an extreme to which we have become addicted, speed approaches pathology. So we end up normalizing the pathological in our everyday lives. This is not just attention deficit disorder but *compulsory* attention deficit disorder, defined by a culture in which we are dissuaded from concentration and continuity and rewarded for pursuing jump-cut lives. One job, one spouse, one career, one home, one personality over a whole lifetime seem so monotonous and, well, from the kids' perspective, so *boring*. Enduring commitments, like enduring tastes, do not lend themselves to the faddishness on which consumerism depends. New friends, new families, new lovers, new homes, new fashions mean new commodities, new credit cards, new shopping sprees, new products, and hence new purchases. Keeping up the daunting pace of change is hard: the infantilist ethos helps, since kids are quick.

The emblem of the consumerist preference for fast, which has become the emblem of American style consumerism for the rest of the world, is of course fast food. Fast food has been much misunderstood, even by its critics. In Eric Schlosser's book *Fast Food Nation*, much of the focus is on *what* we eat, its overall quality, and how it affects our health as well as the international economy and the environment, crucial topics all. But fast food's essence is not *what* it is but *how* it is: its speed, to which everything else including its quality and variety or lack of quality and lack of variety is linked. If there are as yet no fast caviar cafés or fast truffle shops, it is not because caviar and truffles are expensive, but only because complex foods demand well-developed palates and by their very nature demand to be consumed slowly. Oyster bars are a compromise between speed and mature taste, and coffee chains like Starbucks invite a certain leisure—along with wireless multitasking. But for the most part, most consumer outlets are about fast while much of what we experience as complex pleasure requires that it happen slowly. To consume is not to experience but to appropriate and swallow for purposes other than intrinsic pleasure, the way dogs eat.

There is actually a restaurant in New Jersey called Stuff Yer Face, and fast food generally is about stuffing your face: about nutrition, fueling up, taking in the calories, food as an instrumentality, eaters as mere animals

responding to biological imperatives. Big Macs, fast fries, and doughnuts give a certain pleasure of course—grease, salt, and sugar are tasty. But their virtue is precisely that their rewards are quick and brief, and do not call for slow savoring. A fast read or fast sex may also have certain virtues, but the quality of the pleasure they afford is not among them (that's why premature ejaculation is premature—it comes before the pleasure can be experienced and suggests a lack of erotic maturity). Speed-reading Proust or skimming Whitman makes no more sense than accelerating a vacation, rushing Lovemaking, or chug-a-lugging Hennessy. The things we most care about we do most slowly: speed-reading and zipless fucks are actually oxymorons, not because reading and lovemaking cannot be done in a hurry but because doing them in a hurry corrupts what they are about.

Fast tandoori and fast tacos are in fact available in London and Los Angeles and elsewhere, and fast does not have to mean tasteless or monocultural. The point is not to privilege the highbrow or insist on a hierarchy of foods. For gourmet fast foods differ little from fast burgers and fast fries in their ultimate impact on culture. Being "fast" means we scarcely taste them anyway. It really is not a question of class, since McDonald's itself, although predominantly down-market in the United States, is up-market in Moscow and Peking and perfectly middlebrow in many European cities. The point is the speed with which food is bought and consumed, the radical informality and associability of the consuming process, the contrast between what we do when we eat and what we do when we (say) break bread together or dine or share a repast. Dining cannot be hurried without impeaching its integrity as dining: Mama Napoli's sweet sausages cannot be consumed like hotdogs in a face-stuffing contest and keep their character as Mama's sweet sausages meant to evoke an evening's family dinner on Mulberry Street. Thanksgiving at Wendy's isn't possible, even if Wendy's hires a four-star chef and puts turkey, sweet potatoes, and cranberry sauce on real crockery—unless you have two or three hours and an extended family at the ready, in which case why would you be at Wendy's? Fast food has been slow in coming. It had its origin in TV dinners where marketers first discovered there was money to be made in helping along and profiting off the American family's time-compressing impatience

with family dining. The growing addiction to quick food-preparation and easy multitask eating led quickly to watch-the-tube eating, do-your-homework eating, call-a-buddy eating, answer-your-email eating, and shop-the-Home-Shopping-Network eating. Dining was not the point anymore, communion and ritual were wholly beside the point. It was about getting another task out of the way, fueling up for other activities. Business and trade have always put pressure on schedules and families: under the Ottoman Empire, fast kebab street vendors catered to traders and travelers in a hurry. This wasn't about dining either, but it was a prudent supplement for busy folks at busy times in what was otherwise a serious dining culture. But dining is about sociability, eating as ritual and food as symbol, with the dining table as a kind of secular altar to the family home and hearth. Today, the TV or the computer screen have taken over the ritual function of household altar, and eating is solitary and passive. According to the Nutrition Education Network, up to 40 percent of American families "never or seldom eat together, and that segment is growing."⁴⁰ The figures worsen as children get older. It is as if the Roman Catholic mass had been reduced to chewing on communion-wafer gum.

Fast food's content is relevant to fast food's essence then only inasmuch as kids' preferences for fast over slow are complemented by kids' preferences for simple over complex and bland over spicy. Sugar and salt and animal fat trump sour and pepper and olive oil in seducing kids (young and old alike) into taking a couple of minutes to stuff their little (and large) faces. Finger-licking good rather than taste-enhancing delicious: the real key to fast food is the informality and speed with which it is eaten, the ritual-free but highly efficient processing of fast-fuel energy necessary to other youthful activities such as i-messaging, video games and television watching; and (in time) sex and the ardors of shopping. Sugar and caffeine fixes are to a flagging shopper what a whiff of salts is to the woozy prize-fighter.

These kid characteristics have adult marketplace parallels, of course. Mall food-courts are designed as quick pit stops where shoppers can refuel on the run without borrowing too much valuable time from the spending spree they are supposed to be embarked on. It is not an accident that sub-

urban malls host no serious restaurants where shoppers might be detained for hours at a time from their consumer rounds. In the same manner, urban and suburban fast-food emporiums facilitate fast eating for business workaholics for whom a French three-hour lunch or a Spanish leisurely noontime repast at home with the family impairs the efficiency of the full work day. The Fundación Independiente in Madrid has launched a campaign to get rid of such long lunches. The foundation's president said pointedly, "In a globalized world, we have to have schedules that are more similar to those in the rest of the world so we can be better connected. These Spanish lunches of two to three hours are very pleasant, but they are not very productive."⁴¹ Even seemingly leisure-minded hangout establishments like Starbucks or sports bars offer television and wireless internet connectivity so that customers affecting to chill can in fact engage in ongoing laptop and Bluetooth or BlackBerry multitasking, video shopping included, over a laid-back latte grande. Customers can be busily engaged in several places at once even as they seem to be kicking back in one single place.

The three primary pairs of infantilization, easy over hard, simple over complex, and fast over slow, contain and entail a host of affiliated dyads that merit at least passing mention. Easy and simple and quick privilege pure play over work—something the ethos of infantilization encourages—although, as we have seen, it may prefer play to work most when it can convert work into play. Nowhere is the conflation of work and play more evident than in the commercialization of recreational athletics that has increasingly turned youthful players into full-time, in-training preprofessionals, that has turned school and collegiate athletics into a commercial farm-team system for professional sports, and has at the same time made professional athletes into children whose behavior is not only infantilized but celebrated in its infantilized form. Twenty-five years ago, Neil Postman was already using the disappearance of children's games and transformation of kids' sports into "the business of adults" as evidence for what he called the "merging of children's and adults' values and styles"—a prescient account of what I understand as infantilization.⁴² The other side of the infantilization of adult athletes is the professionalization of children's

play in the hope of making a profit.⁴³ Critics fault the "greedy kids" or their greedy parents. But it is the entertainment corporations that own and profit from professional sports that seem to be "guilty of tempting adults to turn back the calendar of children."⁴⁴ Kids are not growing up faster: they are being grown up faster so that they can work at what they would otherwise be playing at in order to feed the craving of the empire of commercial sport for new talent.⁴⁵

Yet even as the kids are brought along too fast, encouraged to overtrain and overspecialize in a manner that hurts their bodies and impedes their natural playfulness, the athletes they become not only cultivate kiddie pleasure but are helped to do so by their employers who understand the connections between controlling athletes and conditioned puerility. This is not simply about childish players, but about management preferences for pliable athletes who leave the adult stuff (like trades and wages and union benefits) to the owners or to their own professional agents who are less interested in their clients' careers than in maximizing their own profits. The players absorb the message in a hurry so that the burly men who make millions playing kids games into middle age have a hard time growing up.

Infantilization plays out across the board in consumer society, also privileging images and pictures over words. It is not that words are always vehicles of complexity and truth-seeking—a picture can be worth a thousand words, and words can become tokens of simplification, propaganda, and manipulation. On the whole, however, we have built democratic institutions as well as science, philosophy, and literature (hence, some might argue, civilization) around deliberation and common conversation. Language offers common ground (if sometimes common obfuscation as well). It probably discloses as much of truth—however little that may be—as we are likely to achieve. The preference today for pictures is, in any case, rarely a preference for images as surrogates for the persuasive power of language, but more often a way around that power: a way to short-circuit mature modes of communication whether they are pictorial or linguistic. Infantilism's preference for simple, easy and fast gives it an affinity for certain political forms over others. Like consumerism itself, it attaches

itself more readily to solitaires (or packs of solitaires) engaged in common behaviors such as shopping than to communities that deliberate together before they act together. By the same token, the infantilist ethos is fortified by an ideology of entitlement in which human beings are seen first of all as individuals—what political scientists might call rights-bearing legal persons—rather than as family members, lovers, kin-people, or citizens of a civic community. This ideology is closely associated with American individualism and the modern ethos generally, and it spurns the ethics of obligation and responsibility that place the individual in a circle of sociability in which identity is given in part by association with and duty toward others. It did not please many Americans, whether they were Catholics or not, that the new Pope Benedict XVI (when he was Cardinal Ratzinger of Munich) wrote bluntly about modernity's "dictatorship of relativism . . . which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires."⁴⁶ Yet Pope Benedict was offering not just an indictment of the entailments of the infantilist ethos but an accurate portrayal of its biases as well, and one that cannot be written off as an expression of his own antique moralist biases (which, ironically, smack of the Protestant ethic).

The ethics of narcissism promote and reflect a preference for the timeless present over temporality itself—whether past or future. The cult of now has always been an American temptation. Immigrants have long found their way to American shores as an escape from the burdens of prejudice and error of the kind Voltaire associated with history. America was, in Tom Paine's words in *Rights of Man*, "life as in the beginning of the world"—life liberated from the cumulative burdens of time, the possibility of starting over again fresh. This penchant for the near over the remote and the instantaneous over the enduring long insulated the United States from the conservative habits of cultures wed to their own pasts and paralyzed by the historical yoke under which they labored. But embodied in an infantilizing ethos, the liberation from time has become an obliviousness to history and a foolish ignorance of mortality. Birth identity is erased, because it is the American promise that birth does not matter. Americans insist where they come from is irrelevant. Death too is erased (cryonics!), because—oblivious to the future and guaranteed immunity against the

aging process by the consumables we purchase—we are happily ensconced in the timeless present and hence momentarily immortal.

In each of these cases, the infantilist ethos tracks elements already present in the modern psyche, but takes away their ambiguity, treating them as instrumentally virtuous, because they are necessary to the success of consumer capitalism in distress. The ethos consumerism needs embraces puerility but without nuance, and it shills for childishness but without recognizing the saving virtues of childhood. In rationalizing puerility, it cites the obligation of producers to give consumers "what they want" and the rights of consumers to exercise their "freedom" through the marketplace.

As thoughtful critics we can and must debate the distinctions by which children and adults are separated into paradigmatic groups at odds with one another; we can see the moral insufficiencies of traditional notions of what it means to be grown up (ridigity, conventionalism, closed-mindedness), and the protoethical aspects of some of childhood's ideals (freshness, spontaneity, playfulness). There is little doubt that so-called grown-up cultures can draw from childhood's more attractive features at least some of their animating mature values. Easy, we have suggested, can also mean simple and unencumbered as in natural, pure, and innocent, while hard can mean opaque, turgid, and complicated. Adult cultures seek ways to make their artifices seem "natural" and to make complexities read as simple—transparent and lucid. The Protestants and above all the Puritans were protesting precisely against the over-articulated iconography and opaque liturgy with which Catholicism had, through its worldly institutionalization, come to problematize and obscure the truths of simple Christian faith. Protestantism was hence both a return to Christianity's "simple" roots even as it represented an evolution of Christianity made possible by such advances as movable type and adult literacy, which gave large populations direct access to vernacular translations of the Bible so that they could engage the "word of God" as mature adults, rather than having scripture spoon-fed to them like children.

Play may be a silly exercise in pretending, but it can also entail a sense of exploration, freedom, and spontaneity: in its evolved form it yields the play that is a sermon, a mass, or a theater piece. Play thus elaborated may

become what religion and art share and hence what philosophers such as Hegel and Nietzsche find precious in them. Even the Christian celebration of work disdains anal obsessiveness, lugubrious earnestness, and joyless exertion in favor of a kind of holy exuberance that transforms its work into holy purposefulness: just think of the young Christian hero in the film about the 1924 Paris Olympics (*Chariots of Fire*) exclaiming ecstatically that he runs—plays, works, and lives—for the glory of God.

Even instant gratification can suggest a capacity for living fully in the minute, while deferring pleasure can be a cover for alienation from activity and disengagement from life. Psychoanalysis aims at (among other things) searching out, identifying, and overcoming such apparent “virtues” with which neurotics may rationalize what is actually repression and psychic disorder. As Herbert Marcuse has observed, for Freud civilization itself is necessarily synonymous with repression—the “transformation of the *pleasure principle* into the *reality principle*.” In the first instance, this means if humans are to survive they must become adult by moving from (in Marcuse’s gloss) immediate satisfaction to delayed satisfaction, from pleasure to restraint of pleasure, from joy (play) to toil (work), from receptiveness to productivity, and from the absence of repression to security.⁴⁷ Yet Freud himself is dialectical, believing that “because of this lasting gain through renunciation and restraint . . . the reality principle ‘safeguards’ rather than ‘dethrones,’ ‘modifies’ rather than denies, the pleasure principle.”⁴⁸ That is to say, civilization ultimately conserves a vital element of the id’s pleasure principle by subjecting it to the constraints of the civilizational superego. This is Erik Erikson’s point when he considers the relations of toys to reason, and of playfulness to mastering reality.

In the same manner, the entire catalog of dichotomies I have organized around the child and the adult is subject to dialectical inversion in the manner of Freud: the child’s pictorial imagination may conjure fantasies, but it can also disclose truths (“a picture is worth a thousand words”) as readily as adult words can obscure them (“it depends on what the meaning of ‘is’ is”); which is to say, words serve lawyers and liars as well as philosophers and prophets. Artists and photographers have often made images vessels of truth. Reason quite notoriously has its vices (abstraction, deracination,

affectation, and rationalization), while feelings and sentiments quite famously have their virtues (concreteness, authenticity, immediacy, and honest affect). In short, as in most such simple oppositions, moral valence in the opposition between the childish and the adult turns out to be dialectical. Neither side of the dichotomy carries the whole of moral truth.

Yet all of these caveats do not alter the overwhelming historical evidence suggesting that major civilizations and religions, while they certainly encompass and conserve modified forms of childhood’s innocent virtues, and work hard at protecting their innocent manifestation in children, nonetheless share a common conviction that the time must come when adults put away childish things, civilize their instincts, and grow up. If children cannot become parents, the children of children cannot thrive. One might even argue that this passage from being and behaving as the children of parents to being and behaving as the parents of children is bound up with what we mean when we speak of a people as civilized. The conscious association of human sexuality with reproduction might be said both to diminish pleasure (responsibility, anxiety, and repression quickly replace hedonistic enjoyment) and enhance happiness, opening up the way to our sense of belonging to a permanent community (a species) that outlives our individual lives.

The pleasure principle, unadulterated, destroys the life it pleasures, grasping, seizing, and hurting at will—in Freud’s images, mindlessly slaying fathers and bedding mothers at desire’s first impulse without thought to consequences. That is why civilizations, although they may prize aspects of childhood just as individuals do, and even work to find a place for them in some modified form in adult culture, will lean institutionally toward the disciplining of impulse and insist on measuring the worth of childhood by adult standards. Not even Freud, so sensitive to repression’s potential to sicken us, is willing to surrender its civilizing proclivities unless that yielding can be achieved without regression to infantilism.

The culture of modern consumer capitalism has thrown all this Freudian (and Protestant) baggage to the winds. For the first time in history, a society has felt its economic survival demands a kind of controlled regression, a culture that promotes puerility rather than maturation. The

strategy does not represent a countercultural campaign to recognize those features of childhood that might be sources of virtue (innocence, authenticity, creativity, spontaneity, and playfulness). On the contrary, it is a campaign to repress those features of childhood in favor of others that make adults vulnerable, manipulable, impulsive, and irrational. This strategy makes good commercial sense, since the market does not infantilize out of an ethical love for childhood and its putative virtues but only out of an instrumental need to sell unnecessary goods to people whose adult judgment and tastes are obstacles to such consumption. On the other hand, it makes little sense ethically or civilizationally.

Civilization may wish to encourage spontaneity, even impulsiveness, as prods to creativity and invention. When the market and its infantlist ethos cultivate impulsiveness, however, it is *directed* impulsiveness. Retailers do not draw the young to malls or theme parks or multiplexes to encourage them to socialize or hang out or cruise as they might "naturally" do, but to put them to work shopping, to direct their play to commodities and for-pay entertainment, to turn the impulse to socialize into an impulse to consume. Merchandisers sometimes cultivate kids to help them determine taste (in so-called buzz marketing, for example), and marketers depend on the taste of the young for gossip and peer interaction to turn them into agents of taste. As clear-eyed observers of the Tom Hanks character in the movie *Big* know, the twelve-year-old in the adult's body may look like he's having innocent fun, but in fact a smart company is instrumentalizing fun and using the Hanks character as a tool for shaping public tastes and selling the latest goods. Its aims (largely unnoticed in the movie) are neither innocent, nor finally much fun.

The marketers turn Peter Pan into their Pied Piper, pretending to free the young from the constraints of adult discipline in order to impose on them the discipline of the consumer market. The Pied Piper of Hamelin lured away the children of the village because their parents would not pay him for ridding them of their rats. The marketplace's Pied Piper lures away the children because their parents are "gatekeepers" who stand in the way of their children's induction into the hall of consumers. As the Pied Piper once did, the market today pretends to empower the children

it seduces, telling them they will be made potent by the disempowerment of their elders. Freed from possessive parents, they are actually incarcerated in a ubiquitous mall of the juvenile mind.

In his *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch worried about the displaced paternalism represented by the welfare state, treating intelligently with a theme that has become a conservative staple. What A. V. Dicey (cited approvingly by Milton Friedman) said about the state mirrors Lasch's anxiety: although, Dicey writes, the "beneficial effects of State intervention" may be "direct, immediate, and, so to speak, visible," we must be wary of its "evil effects" which are often "gradual and indirect, and lie out of sight."⁴⁹ Yet what is more worrisome today, when the evils of the state are so widely noted and the virtues of the market so uncritically embraced, is the invisible paternalism represented by consumer capitalism's advertisers and merchandisers. These wily advocates of the infantlist ethos—very much like the former celebrants of the benevolent state—claim to be "freeing" children from parental bonds in the name of autonomy when in fact they themselves are taking the parents' place as taste- and trendsetters, with "evil effects" that are the more dangerous for being "gradual and indirect, and . . . out of sight."

The Joe Camel ads for cigarettes that have given way to the sick beer ads featuring turtles, parrots, and other kiddie staples, like the roadside playpens at McDonald's and the Peter Pan-themed rides of Disneyland (pirates and cowboys and Indians all still there a hundred years later) are designed not to help children remain children but to "help" children become grown-up consumers of cigarettes or live beer or Big Macs or Disney's whole lifeline of products from animated films to new-town utopias like Celebration, Florida. Disneyland sells childhood mythology in order to reap grown-up profits. The play at the theme park is pay as you go, a relatively passive "ride" experience that happens to you in return for your dollar. In these new theme-park playgrounds that now occupy the leisure time of cash-carrying kids, parents are reduced to the role of minders with wallets.

There is of course irony in an "adult culture" which is intensely serious and very grown up—what is serious if not the bottom line?—in how it

conspires to use childhood playfulness, its innocent spontaneity and simple feelings, to sell all it has to sell. The outcome is a more childish, a less free, and a more undisciplined civilization—not really the “disappearance of childhood” (as Neil Postman titled his book a generation ago), but the disappearance of adulthood, because childhood is so much more profitable to the economy of consumerism.

A related paradox is evident in America’s workaholic marketplace, where “leisure time” and “playful spectatorship” are anything but leisurely or playful, and where people actually work longer hours than their compatriots anywhere else in the industrialized world, not for the glory of work but for the supposed rewards of play. No people work harder at play or expend more energy on leisure than American consumers. Leisure means anything but lazy here. No French-style, thirty-five-hour workweek in the United States—the abbreviated Gallic workweek mandated by law now being ridiculed in those parts of Europe anxious to imitate the United States. No six-week summer vacations where business literally comes to a nearly summer-long halt in world cities like Berlin or Madrid. No original “slow food” in the manner of the charming Italian movement that affects to put a roadblock in the way of McDonald’s.

In the postmodern capitalist economy it’s hard work creating the easy life. A full-service shopping society needs consumers with a lot of leisure, but in fact leaves them little time for anything but consumption and the hard work that pays for consumption, so that they rarely feel leisurely or free. Vacation destinations and the travel to reach them are anything but vacations from shopping. There is shopping underway at airport malls and train-station malls, shopping at theme-park and casino facilities, shopping all along the highways leading to and at the tourist destinations to which they lead, shopping at every grand hotel lobby, and shopping on television and the internet when you get to your room.

The consumer of the cornucopia of spectator commodities available from a hardworking, overproducing entertainment industry must work even harder than the producers to take it all in. Can any consumer keep up with the movies, television programs, internet offerings, video games, music downloads, and athletic competitions that constitute the modern

marketplace’s new bread and circuses? It makes for disciplined work for an individual to stay abreast with any one of these sectors. Yet unless she does, the market economy falters. No wonder leisure, squeezed between the extended hours of work, often feels like a full-time job. If as Dan Cook has declared, childhood makes capitalism hum, the kids better get to work.