

In Praise of Disobedience

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prologue

The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude (1548)

never has our obedience
been more complete,
craven or calamitous



Étienne de La Boétie (1530–1563)

structure

1. 21st Century Obedience

2. What does this say about us?

3. A new public health

21st Century Obedience

The 24/7 production, promotion, placement and pricing of products and services

The rhetoric of customer satisfaction, our needs being paramount – that we are worth it, are loving it and every little is helping

The equally sophisticated and ubiquitous effort that is put into appealing to stakeholders

We know this is so for diet, alcohol and tobacco – but the problems are much broader and deeper than that

21st Century Obedience

Starts young

'Children are important to marketers for three fundamental reasons:

- 1. They represent a large market in themselves because they have their own money to spend.*
- 2. They influence their parents' selection of products and brands*
- 3. They will grow up to be consumers of everything; hence marketers need to start building up their brand consciousness and loyalty as early as possible.'*

21st Century Obedience

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88% of smokers
start as children

Surgeon General (2012)

21st Century Obedience

Joining the on the marketing team

Facebook has struck a multimillion-dollar advertising partnership with Diageo in the latest move by the social networking website to form closer ties with marketers....

Financial Times, 18 September 2011

Facebook are working with us to make sure that we are not only fan collecting but that they are actively engaged and driving advocacy for our brands. We are looking for increases in customer engagement and increases in sales and share...

Kathy Parker, Diageo's Senior Vice-president Global Marketing

GUCCI women men kids gifts icons collections world of gucci login | creat

< back home > baby (0-36 months) > newborn & gift sets

my first gucci two-piece gift set includes short sleeve bodysuit and bib

description

- optical white interlock jersey with print in silver
- short sleeve bodysuit with shoulder and bottom snap closure
- bib with snap closure
- Made in Italy
- 100% cotton

256676 X3581 9000 **£100**

size guide
select size ▼

[add to wish list](#) [add to shopping bag](#)



even babies can be brand ambassadors

How does such pricing affect inequalities?

GUCCI women men kids gifts icons collections world of gucci

< back home > baby accessories > bibs

gucci little friends print bib

description

- white coated cotton with gucci little friends print
- beige trim
- 100% cotton
- 100% polyurethane coating
- Made in Italy

343564 3K500 9079 **£45**
your selection is available

[add to wish list](#) [add to shopping bag](#)



21st Century Obedience

Not just our bodies, but our minds and our souls
are under siege

getting whatever we want, where and when we
want it, in its most appealing form is gradually
turning us into unthinking, over-indulged tyrants

As is our political economy

democratic deficit

‘user friendly makes a hash of democracy. Democracy requires that citizens be willing to make some effort to find out how the world around them works. Few American proponents of the war in Iraq, wanted to learn about Iraq (most couldn’t in fact locate it on a map)’

Richard Sennett (2006) *The Culture of the New Capitalism*

‘a really efficient totalitarian state would be one in which the all-powerful executive of political bosses and their managers control an army of slaves who do not need to be coerced because they love their servitude’.

Huxley, A. (1958) *Brave New World Revisited*

21st Century Obedience

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As is our political economy

And of course our planet...

the problem in a nutshell

every increasing
growth

=

every increasing
consumption

marketing
(gets us shopping;
keeps us quiescent)

this is a catastrophe....



this is a catastrophe.....

21st Century Obedience

- Note though, the problem is not marketing, it is not business: Steinbeck's dirt farmers were in business.
- Marketing is as old as human society – it is about cooperation, exchange and relationship building. It explains how our weak and feeble species has succeeded
- The problem is power: **absolute** (companies bigger than countries); **systemic** (growth is remorseless) and **illegitimate** power. (eg The UK 'private' rail system gets 12X the subsidy of its nationalised predecessor)
- And it is power we freely and so generously bestow

structure

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What does this say about us?

- We are collaborating in our own destruction
- Yes marketing is powerful, and Coke is a behemoth
- But we don't have to go shopping, gawp at the latest spectacle or connect umbilically to multiple screens
- Nike says it all: we just do it

What does this say about us?



Étienne de La Boétie (1530–1563)

The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude

He explains why unjust systems prevail and how they can be changed

- They prevail because we let them (the losers vastly outnumber the winners)
- They change when we retract our permission (cf Gandhi, The Civil Rights Movement)

What does this say about us?

La Boétie shows that the elite uses four techniques to ensure that we, the 99%, passively collaborate:

- the ready provision of bread (consumer gewgaws) and circuses (undemanding entertainment)
- a cloak of symbols and mysticism (advertising)
- and the systematic reward of collusion (customer service, wages, attention)

What does this say about us?

La Boétie
to ensure

We fall for it - again and
again and again

techniques
to cooperate:

- the ready provision of bread (consumer

We fall for the stuff; we fall for the
stultifying quiescence that comes with
the retail treadmill

We fall for the individualistic framing that
sees any intervention as a threat to freedom
- ignoring the benefits of collective living

structure

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A new public health

- We need to wake up; start paying attention
- Look critically not just at big tobacco, alcohol and food but the whole system of consumer capitalism
- To point out that our foolish consumption behaviour is doing not just for our health but our kids, our souls and our planet
- Then we have to do two things:
 - Call for change
 - Say what we are for

A new public health

Call for change

- La Boétie explained this 500 years ago
- There is no need for violence or the manning of barricades
- We just have to withdraw our collaboration, and encourage others to do the same
- As he explained there is always a vanguard who see behind the curtain

A new public health

Call for change

“There are always a few ... who feel the weight of the yoke and cannot restrain themselves from attempting to shake it off... who never become tamed under subjection...

Who, possessed of clear minds and far-sighted spirit, are not satisfied ... to see only what is at their feet

Who, having good minds of their own, have further trained them by study and learning. For them slavery has no satisfactions, no matter how well disguised”

A new public health

Call for change

- Individual change: Increasing critical awareness: helping people to see the trap they are in
- Systemic change: regulation of the marketing system that push people back into passivity

Recognising that in a democracy these two are symbiotically connected – the best way (only way?) to get regulatory change is by popular demand

A new public health

Say what we are for

- We in public health are good at saying what we are against...
- We need to start saying what we are for
- If corporate capitalism is offers the dream (nightmare) of perpetual material satisfaction; what do we offer?
- Only the elixir of life....

A new public health

Say what we are for

- Since John Snow took the handle off the stand pipe we have uncovered one way after another that we can all make our lives healthier, happier and longer
- We have found something that eluded the greatest minds down the ages: how to take control of your own life and longevity
- How to be a driver not a passenger
- A citizen not a consumer

A new public health

If corporate capitalism is demanding obedience, our task is not to say, 'no, obey us instead' it is to encourage people to think for themselves, be critical and don't accept anything as given

This speaks to the essence of our humanity:

- to overcome adversity, to find our own path.
- The quest for 'self-transcendence' (Aldous Huxley 1971)
'to escape from the tormenting consciousness of being merely ourselves'

It is not easy

'walker, there is no path –
you must make your own'

But it is vital

This is how
progress begins



This is how
progress spreads



The Sardane

Keep your coins

I want change

Our job is to work with her to achieve it