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Commentary

PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIETY

For the Experiences of a Lifetime, Sign on the Dotted Line



Follow the money to the last remaining independent sphere of human activity—the culture.

By JEREMY RIFKIN

The big changes in history, the ones that fundamentally alter how we think and act, have a way of creeping up on us until one day everything we know is suddenly passé and we realize we are in a whole new world. It wasn't until the late 19th century, for example, that the British historian Arnold Toynbee coined the term "the Industrial Age," nearly 100 years after it first arrived on the world scene.

Similarly, for the better part of the 20th century, a new form of capitalism has been slowly gestating and is only now about to overtake industrial capitalism. We are entering an "age of access," an era in which the commodification of human time is becoming even more important than the commodification of material things.

Economic forecasters and consultants talk about the "new experience industries" and "the experience economy," terms that did not even exist a few short years ago. Futurist James Ogilvey observes that "growth of the experience industry represents a satiation with the stuff that the industrial revolution produced." Ogilvey says, "Today's consumers don't ask themselves as often, 'What do I want to have that I don't have already?' They are asking, 'What do I want to experience that I have not experienced yet?'"

Experiential commerce is already overtaking us. Travel and tourism is now the leading industry in the world with more than \$3.7 trillion in revenue. By the year 2008, revenues are expected to double to more than \$7.5 trillion or 20% of the world's total gross domestic product,

dwarfing the information industries and other cutting-edge industries.

Meanwhile, malls are metamorphosing into destination entertainment centers where people can play the latest video games, be entertained by Imax, experience virtual reality simulators or socialize at theme clubs like the Rainforest Cafe. At the

same time, millions of people are going online and becoming part of the new cyberspace culture, and cable and satellite television is exploding into hundreds of viewing channels, while "content" companies rush to exploit the many new facets of cultural commerce.

For the wealthier members of society, just about any experience now can be purchased in the cultural marketplace. One can seek spiritual guidance from a

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Tibetan monk at a Renaissance weekend retreat or whisk the family away to Williamsburg, Va., to experience a reenactment of 18th century American life.

The selling of the culture in the form of more and more "paid for" human activity is quickly leading to a world where pecuniary kinds of human relationships are substituting for traditional social relationships. Imagine a world where virtually every activity outside the confines of family relations is a paid-for experience, a world where traditional reciprocal obligations and expectations, mediated by feelings of

faith, empathy and solidarity, are replaced by contractual relations in the form of paid memberships, subscriptions, admission charges, retainers and fees.

We increasingly buy the time of others, their regard and affection, sympathy and attention. We buy enlightenment and play, grooming and grace and everything in between—experiences that at one time were only available to the rich. Lifestyle designers like Martha Stewart and Ralph Lauren help us arrange our homes and wardrobes to create the appropriate cultural impression and ambience; personal trainers manage our bodies, and personal assistants even do our shopping for us. Meanwhile our children are enrolled in every kind of commercially sponsored after-school program and activity designed to improve their athletic prowess, artistic talents and intellectual skills. The very idea of playing with the other kids on the block is becoming an anachronism.

In the 1980s and 1990s, deregulation of government functions and services was the rage. In less than 20 years, the global marketplace successfully absorbed large parts of what was formerly the government sphere—including mass transportation, utilities and telecommunications—into the commercial realm. Now, the economy has turned its attention to the last remaining independent sphere of human activity, the culture, with an eye toward making human experience itself the ultimate commodity.

If there is an Achilles' heel to the new age, it lies in the misguided belief that commercially directed relationships and electronically mediated networks can substitute for traditional relationships and communities. The premise itself is deeply flawed. The two ways of organizing human activity flow from very different sets of assumptions and values, making them irreconcilable rather than analogous.

Traditional relationships are born of such things as kinship, ethnicity, geography and shared spiritual visions. Social contracts are steeped in the notion of indebtedness to ancestors, unborn generations, the Earth and its creatures and a benevolent God.

Membership in traditional communities also brings with it restraints on personal action. Obligations to others take precedence over personal whims, and security flows from being embedded in a larger social organism.

Commodified relationships, on the other hand, are instrumental in nature. The only glue that holds them together is the agreed-upon transaction price. Commercial contracts are bound by neither history nor legacy but rather performance and results. The obligations between parties are explicit, generally quantifiable and spelled out in contractual terms.

Commodified relationships are also designed to maintain a distance between the parties. It is understood at the outset that the relationship is based on nothing deeper than the exchange of money.

Whatever shared experience occurs between the parties in the course of their relationship is meant to be superficial, expedient and short-lived. When a server, for example, shares pleasantries with clients, entertains them, shows concern for their well-being, all parties know that at least some of the emotional flow between the parties is pretense. It is not freely surrendered as a gift but commercially solicited and paid for.

The great issue at hand in the coming years is whether civilization can survive with a greatly reduced government and cultural sphere, with only the commercial sphere left as the primary mediator of human life.

Jeremy Rifkin is the author of "The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism Where All of Life is a Paid-For Experience" (Tarcher/Putnam, April 2000).

This is one in an occasional series.