

A response to jenni russell's 'the selfish generation' essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Jenni Russell's article for the Guardian newspaper that appeared on 6th December 2003 raises contemporary problems in social interactions. She laments the fact that as individual, isolated consumers of a capitalist society, people are gradually losing their humanity. In its place, they are acquiring rather unsavory social tendencies, the most blatant of which is lack of politeness in social interactions. People are always conscious of their own image and social status that they act in an overtly aggressive manner. Hence, there is a tendency for people to take offense where none was intended and inflict hurt where none was warranted. Modern industrial society, as primarily represented by the United States of America and countries in Western Europe, place undue primacy to the superficial over the substantial. This is nowhere truer than with respect to the Public Relations industry's constant barrage of illusory imagery and ego-stroking message in the form of advertisements. This is a pitiable state of affairs, as the current standards of civilization are poorer compared to a century past. This essay will argue that Jenni Russell's point of view holds valid and that it is imperative that our standard of civility improves at the earliest.

Russell's criticism against the capitalist-consumer culture is backed by fact. In this economic paradigm, people are stripped of their higher identities to be equated to units of consumption. By being recognized for their ability to consume products, they themselves turn into commodities. In many ways the bloodshed and human loss witnessed in geopolitical conflicts is a symptom of this fundamental flaw in the global economic order. Though Russell doesn't go to the extent of linking the two phenomena, the connection is obvious to the discerning reader.

The anecdotal evidence for commonplace hostility that Russell presents is experienced by all of us. We've all been in situations explained by her, whether it is an unpleasant exchange with a billing clerk or being the victim of an insecure boss in office. This accessible and verifiable reference to real-life situations makes Russell's arguments quite strong. Further, what makes the author's arguments hold ground is the background research and supportive evidence. For example, she notes,

" Last month new scientific research demonstrated that the brain reacts to a social snub in just the same way as it does to a physical injury. In effect, by our thoughtless and self-protective behavior, we are going through our days delivering small social injuries to one another, each one of which is felt as acutely as physical pain." (Russell, 211)

A serious negative consequence of a capitalist consumerist culture is its tendency to alienate individuals from their own true selves. Most people go through their workdays in a numb routine as a result of not strongly relating to their work. Things they are most passionate about, such as music, dance, literature, etc get relegated to the background as they are preoccupied with the inevitable task of putting bread on the table. A kind of identity crisis develops as individuals are kept away from their most absorbing passions. Moreover, the uniformity and conformity required by the office environment further dents their individual thoughts, feelings and aspirations. Hence, mass production and economies of scale, which are cornerstones of capitalist industry, lead to severe loss in human capital. Moreover, the gains of capitalist industry have been unequally shared, leading to great disparities

between the haves and have-nots. Russell correctly observes how the sharpening class divide is at the root of social friction:

“ Those with the least money and the least authority are made continually aware of others' contempt. The wealthier you are, the more protected you are from the consequences. Prosperous people can largely pay others to be nice to them, yet, they too practice and suffer from the new selfishness.”

(Russell, 212)

One of the deep ironies of this situation is that we are living in an era described by intellectuals as The Information Age. We have unprecedented access to powerful media for communication. Yet it is precisely in the area of interpersonal communication that we fall short of. We as members of society show a deficit in qualities such as empathy, solidarity and a sense of camaraderie. The advanced and lightening quick digital media, while opening up new vistas for communication, has actually diminished face to face communication. As a result people inhabit a virtual world of the Internet, where make believe takes precedence to hard core truths. In the same vein, the sentiments, sensibilities and personalities exhibited by people via these media carried the same sense of make-believe. In an arrangement of this kind the ' selfishness' of individuals alluded by Jenni Russell takes firm root.

While the sociological degradation is quite clear, the psychological abnormality underpinning social friction is outwardly apparent. The authoritarian boss who gets an ego-boost in relation to controlling his subordinates, the menial worker who gets seeks respite by underperforming

his role, etc, are all displaying their inherent weaknesses by way of showing strength or acting smart. In either case their low self esteem is evident to the discerning psychologist. As is often the case, it does not matter if the individual is suffering from inferiority or superiority complex. The key word is 'complex', which indicates abnormality and pathology. And it is often the people who are feeling inferior who project a sense of false superiority - what psychologists call a cognitive mechanism to compensate for perceived deficiencies.