There is Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself

Paul Durrenberger

With Thanksgiving behind us, all eyes are turned on the retailers for auguries of how our economy is doing. This is the season of massive buying even in an economy based on consumption.

Economists are busily measuring the expenditures against previous years and predicting the future of the economy like soothsayers of ancient times. Anthropologists usually take a broader look. We like to think of how any one thing is related to everything else. That makes anthropology as complex and messy as real life.

Jules Henry is one anthropologist who understood and wrote perceptively about the complexities of life in the United States in the 60s. You can consume stuff yourself when you buy it or indirectly when you pay taxes to buy stuff like schools, infrastructure, hospitals, and arms. Governments try to make public consumption appear to be egoistic so that people don’t mind paying taxes so much. How can a warplane, a missile, a tank appear to be the same as a new car in your own garage? Massive expenditures on arms make people feel like they’re spending on themselves. Governments say that more military production means more prosperity, more money in your pocket, more stuff you can buy.

A warplane feels like your own if you’re afraid of whoever it’s bombing. In Jules Henry’s day, the fear of Communists drove consumer euphoria and we grew fat with fear. A fearless society would be an economic disaster. In our economic system, it is necessary to foster fear. Consumption numbs the feelings of fear.
When people are afraid, he argued, they can attack or run away. We cannot find what causes our fear to attack it. We cannot flee. So we take the third alternative of numbing the fear by “sexuality, eating, and in general having a good time.” That’s good for the economy. To do these things, people buy stuff.

Since those days we’ve weathered the war in Vietnam and witnessed the fall of the feared Communists around the world. And yet we see all around us increasing levels of all those things that deaden fear—sexuality in every medium including real life, eating and consequent obesity, and hedonism.

What’s left to fear? The axis of evil and associated terrorists.

I think Jules Henry must have been right. Why else would it be so important for our government to manufacture and sustain fear and attempt to create euphoria at massive expenditures on arms.

If it’s a good Christmas, we will know it’s working.

Happy shopping and Merry Christmas.