Can There Ever Be Too Many Flowers Blooming?

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Fifty years of psychological research have confirmed the obvious: freedom and

autonomy are essential to human well being. Unless people can exert significant control

over the events in their lives, they are diminished. Indeed they are candidates for clinical

depression (Seligman, 1975). And at the level of entire societies, there is evidence that

democratic political organization, including the protection of civil liberties, has a bigger

effect on life satisfaction than does material affluence—at least among those whose

material circumstances meet subsistence needs.

The operational sign of freedom and autonomy is choice. To be free and

autonomous is to be able to make choices. And this means both that no one compels you

to do anything, and that there are real options to choose among. Freedom of choice by

statute or ideological commitment is empty if your world affords you few alternative

courses of action. Thus, we have a kind of syllogism: the more autonomous people are,

the better off they are, and the more choice people have the more autonomous they are.

Thus, the more choice people have, the better off they are.

This line of reasoning comports nicely with ideological defenses of the free

market as the ideal institution for the production and distribution of goods and services.

A central aim of public policy in a democratic society should be improving the welfare of

its citizens. Even when resources are plentiful, this is an extremely challenging task,

because of the difficulty of determining what "welfare" consists in. Beyond basic

necessities, there is great individual variation in what people want out of life. This is true

with respect to material goods, and it is also true with respect to what people want from

their work, their medical care, their educational opportunities, their relationships with

others, their public institutions, the arts, and just about everything else. So any specific

commitment of public resources (to the arts, to improved science curricula, to green

spaces, to medical facilities, and so on) is likely to please some people and displease

others.

     The way to solve this problem, we are often told, is to provide a wide range of

opportunities and let people choose for themselves whatever promotes their personal

welfare.   Since each individual is in the best position to judge his or her welfare, putting

resource allocation decisions into the hands of individuals is a solution to the social

welfare problem that can not be improved upon. This idea has been the central dogma of

neoclassical economics from its inception. To improve welfare, one must increase

freedom of choice, not because increased choice is intrinsically good necessarily (though

it is), but because it increases the chances that each individual will be able to find

<u>something</u> that serves his or her interests.

     In short, if some choice is good, then more choice is better. Adding options is

what economists call Pareto efficient: it makes no one worse off (because those who are

satisfied with the options that are already available can ignore the new ones), and is

bound to make someone (who is not satisfied with existing options) better off.

     Though this line of argument is normally applied to the world of material goods,

it seems even more applicable to culture. For in addition to the fact that choice enables

each individual to participate in cultural forms that suit his or her own tastes and
preferences, a proliferation of cultural forms and objects will also have "positive
externalities." People who wouldn't normally choose to listen to hip hop music
nonetheless get to benefit from its immediacy on those occasions when they are exposed
to it. People who aren't turned on by abstract expressionism can still have their
conception of what visual art can be expanded when they see it. The proliferation of
cultural forms enlivens the imagination of all members of a society. It enriches our sense
of human possibility. It may even empower people to be producers as well as consumers
of culture—to find their own, unique mode of self expression. And those who are
offended by abstract expressionism, or feel assaulted by hip hop, can always choose to
stay away from them. So in culture, as in supermarkets, if some choice is good, then
more choice is better. Indeed, the profusion of options may be as good a sign as there is
of the health and vibrancy of culture.

    If this is true, then all signs point to an American culture that has never been in
better health. A new work of fiction is published in the U.S. every thirty seconds. The
year 2003 saw the publication of 175,000 books, a jump of almost twenty percent from
the year before (Miller, 2004). We now have literally hundreds of TV stations to choose
from. Satellite radio, now in its infancy, is giving us hundreds of radio stations as well.
Non profit arts organizations have grown by an order of magnitude in the last generation.
At the Toronto Film Festival in 2004, three hundred films were presented—thirty a day—
far more than even the most exuberant filmgoer could see. And new modes of
distribution are making it easier and easier for us to gain access to all this cultural
diversity. Amazon puts the "world's largest bookstore" in each of our homes. TIVO

allows us to watch whatever TV shows we want, whenever we want. The internet allows

us to taste and then download all the music there is. Indeed, the internet allows an

unmediated relation between producers of culture and consumers. We can read

thousands of blogs, written by people who haven't been able to (or haven't bothered to)

find publishers. We can listen to the music of countless bands that haven't yet secured

record deals. And we can see the paintings of hundreds of artists who aren't represented

by galleries. And each of these new forms of cultural distribution allows us to

personalize—to tailor what we are exposed to to our own tastes and preferences.

Amazon does this for us, using our previous purchases (or mouse clicks) to help it

suggest future purchases. So does satellite radio, with programming to meet every

imaginable taste. And developments like TIVO, and the increasingly omnipresent Ipod,

allow us to edit out every moment of every cultural object or event that doesn't suit us.

This may not be the best of all possible cultural worlds, but it certainly seems to be the

best of all actual cultural worlds. Naysayers may complain that because of commercial

pressure, there is actually less cultural diversity than meets the eye, and that what there is

is mostly crap ("fifty-seven channels and nothing on," as Bruce Springsteen sang), but

even if this is partly true, the internet has so dramatically reduced "barriers to entry" into

the world of culture that the enterprising consumer can now step around the commercial

behemoths and find productions that may not have enough mass market appeal to make

them viable.

The "Psychologic" of Choice

The logic behind the presumption that if some choice is good, more choice is better seems compelling. But what might be called the "psychologic" of choice tells us something different. In the last decade, research evidence has accumulated that there can be too much of a good thing—that a point can be reached at which options paralyze rather than liberate (Schwartz, 2004). And when there are too many choices, two different things happen. First, satisfaction with whatever is chosen diminishes. And second, people choose not to choose at all.

The first demonstration of what I have called the "paradox of choice" was a study by psychologists Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper in which shoppers at a gourmet food store were confronted with a display that offered samples of a high quality imported jam (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). On one day, six flavors of the jam were on display; on another day, twenty-four flavors were on display. Shoppers who stopped by the display and tried the jam were given a coupon that saved them a dollar on any jam they bought. What Iyengar and Lepper found was that the large display attracted more customers than the small display. But when the time came to buy, shoppers who had seen the large display were <u>one-tenth</u> as likely to buy as shoppers who had seen the small display!

And it isn't just about jam. Subsequent studies have shown that:

- Students given a large number of topics from which to chose were less likely to write an extra-credit essay than those given a small number of topics. And when they did choose to write, they wrote essays of lower quality (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000).

- When owners of convenience stores were convinced to reduce the variety of soft drinks and snacks they had available, sales volume <u>increased</u>, as did customer satisfaction (Broniarczyk, Hoyer, & McAlister, 1998).

- Young adults made more matches in an evening of "speed dating" in which they met eight potential partners than in an evening in which they met twenty (Iyengar, unpublished).

- When employees are offered a variety of different funds in which to put voluntary 401(k) retirement contributions, the more funds are available, the less likely they are to invest in any. For every ten funds offered, rate of participation goes <u>down</u> two percent. And this occurs despite the fact that in many cases, by failing to participate, employees are passing up significant sums of matching money from employers (Iyengar & Jiang, under review).

There are several reasons why increased options can lead to decreased choices. As the number of options increases, the costs, in time and effort, of gathering the information needed to make a good choice also increase. The level of certainly people have about their choice decreases. And the anticipation that they will regret their choice increases. All of these factors can lead to decision paralysis. And then, if and when people finally do choose, they will likely be less satisfied with the results of the choice than they would have been had there been fewer options. My colleagues and I have identified several reasons why increasing options can lead to decreased satisfaction with the chosen option (Schwartz et al., 2002; see Schwartz, 2004). Among them are:

- <u>Regret.</u> To the extent that the chosen option is less than perfect (as all chosen

  options inevitably are), it is easier to regret a choice if the alternatives were

  plentiful than if they were scarce, especially if the alternatives were so plentiful

  that not all of them could be investigated. Then, one can only imagine how good

  some neglected alternatives must have been. And this regret will subtract from

  satisfaction with the decision.

- <u>Missed opportunities.</u> Even if the chosen option is wonderful, it is extremely

  likely that many rejected options will also have had at least some wonderful

  features that the chooser had to pass up. As more options are considered, these

  missed opportunities will add up, and cumulatively diminish satisfaction with the

  chosen alternative.

- <u>The curse of high expectations.</u> With many options to choose from, it is hard to

  resist the expectation that what one finally chooses will be perfect, or at least,

  extraordinary. We know from a great deal of research that the satisfaction people

  get from their experiences has more to do with whether the experiences meet or

  exceed expectations than with the absolute quality of the experiences themselves.

- <u>Self blame.</u> In a world of limited choice, a disappointing result can be blamed on

  the paucity of possibilities. In a world of unlimited choice, it is hard to avoid

  blaming oneself for disappointment. There is just no excuse for failure.

Let's apply each of these psychological processes to a cultural example: choosing

a movie to see in a twenty-screen multiplex. First, deciding which movie to see may be

so hard that you end up staying home and watching TV. You can easily imagine

regretting whatever choice you make. But if you do go, and the movie is less than perfect

(a little too violent, or too glitzy, or too superficial), you will regret not having made a

different choice, and you'll blame yourself for having made the choice you did (one of

the other movies must have been better). Finally, your assessment of the movie you see

as too this or not enough that will almost certainly be affected by your expectation that

with twenty movies to choose from, surely one of them had to have been better than the

one you saw.

Is Culture Different?

Virtually all the research that has been done on what might be called "choice

overload" has involved some kind or other of goods and services. Though I don't for a

moment believe that choice overload is restricted to the material domain—I think it also

permeates decisions people face about careers, romantic relationships, religious

commitments, and even personal identity—it is important to ask whether there is

something about the world of culture that makes it different. Is it possible, in other

words, that when it comes to culture, more choice is always better? I think there are

reasons to regard culture as a special domain, and I also think that the profusion of

cultural options has positive externalities that make it good for society even if, at the

same time, it adds to the frustration and confusion faced by individuals.

First, when you buy a Toyota, you aren't buying a Honda. When you invest in a

Vanguard mutual fund, you aren't investing in Fidelity. This is often not true when it

comes to culture. As you try to decide whether to buy the new Philip Roth or the new

Stephen King for your flight across the country, you realize that you can buy both.

Whichever one you're in the mood for on the plane, you can read the other one at another time. The same is true of movies, of theater, of TV shows, of music and of museums and galleries. Yes, we all have limits of time and financial resources, but cultural objects and events are not substitutes for one another to the same degree that ordinary material objects are. Perhaps because culture is an "experience good," participating in cultural events may whet the appetite for more participation. "Doing" culture may stimulate demand for more culture. This may be enough, in and of itself, to make choice in the domain of culture an unalloyed blessing.

But perhaps more important are the multiple benefits to society as a whole of all the cultural choice available. The great variety of cultural objects and events presents us with multiple perspectives, life experiences, and views of the world. American society has always contained multiple worldviews, but most of them have not been accessible to the culture at large. Instead, the tastemakers and gatekeepers, constrained by both ideologies and economic realities, made decisions for everyone about what would be available. The result was a pinched view of how people could, should, and actually <u>did</u> live, along with a set of cultural productions (eg., books, magazines, music) in which the voices of most Americans were insignificant, if not invisible. Now almost everyone can become culturally enfranchised, at least in theory (I say "in theory" because the growth of media consolidation threatens cultural diversity in practice.) What could be better for a vibrant democratic society than this. And if it makes life a little more difficult for us as we make our cultural choices, this is a price that is well worth paying. Or is it?

<u>The Paradoxes of Choice Overload in Culture</u>

I'm a huge fan of Amazon. I once heard a guest on a radio talk show say that if

Amazon couldn't figure out a way to be profitable, he would be more than happy to pay

an annual fee to keep it going as a national resource. I agree completely. But why is it

that I, and many others, love Amazon? As I was writing my book about how people are

plagued by choices, my enthusiasm for Amazon nagged at the back of my mind as a

dramatic counterexample. If the arguments in my book were correct, people shouldn't

love Amazon; they should be tortured by it. I hadn't resolved my puzzlement when a

study appeared, by Alexander Chernev (2003), showing that large choice sets are

preferred to small ones when people know what they like and thus know what they are

looking for. "Preference articulation," he called it. If you know what you like, or what

you want, then you just keep searching until you find it, and the larger the set of

possibilities is, the more likely that one of those possibilities will match your preferences.

Yes, it might take time and effort to sort through all that is out there, but at least you

won't experience conflict and bewilderment. Moreover, a larger choice set increases the

chances that what you are looking for actually exists. And finally, technology

(essentially instantaneous web search engines) has enabled us to search through large sets

about as rapidly as we search through small ones.   As I read Chernev's article, I realized

that my own behavior when I used Amazon virtually always fit this pattern. I knew

exactly what I was looking for, and Amazon, the "world's largest bookstore," always

seemed to have it. And that's why I liked Amazon so much. No matter how arcane my

interest, the book was there, in some virtual reality, ready to be shipped. No more

hunting in store after store, no more special ordering with lengthy delay. They had it.

And beyond the endless inventory, Amazon also had an algorithm or heuristic that suggested other titles that were similar to the one I asked for. The algorithm wasn't perfect, but it was surprisingly good. What the combination of my pre-specified goals and the Amazon algorithm did is reduce dramatically the set of choices I actually faced. Indeed, most of the time, the only choice I faced was to buy or not to buy. So if I knew exactly what I wanted, or if I was willing to let Amazon filter the possibilities for me, the potential choice overload problem went away.

If I'm right about what makes Amazon a blessing and not a curse, we face a "paradox of choice" in the domain of culture that is different from the things I wrote about in my book, specifically with regard to the potential contribution that the diversity of cultural offerings makes to creating and sustaining a vibrant, pluralistic, democratic culture. Think about what "knowing what you want" means. It means that you are not so open to cultural diversity or serendipity. Instead, you put blinders on, and walk straight ahead until you find what you're looking for. Indeed, in the Amazon world, you may be even more resistant to fortuitous discovery than in a world offering more modest variety. Once you open yourself up to all that is possible, where does it end? Better to stay focused on the task at hand. And think about what the Amazon algorithm does. If you value Amazon's suggestions, then you are in effect using it to be your filter—your professional shopper. It will suggest possibilities that are <u>like</u> things you have already purchased. Its aim is the opposite of diversity.

So the availability of culture providers like Amazon may mean greater <u>inter</u>-individual diversity, but less <u>intra</u>-individual diversity. Each of us will shop at our own, private bookstore-within-a-bookstore. We will make less contact with literature that is

different from what we already know we like than we would in the neighborhood

bookstores of yesteryear, in which limited offerings made browsing feasible.

And I write about Amazon in detail not because it is unique, but because it is a

vivid example. The twin phenomena of buying only the culture that you want, or relying

on filters to tell you what you <u>should</u> want, is becoming pervasive—a response, I believe,

to overwhelming choice in the world of culture. There are now so many magazines

narrowly tailored to particular interests that there is no need, ever, to read about

something that lies outside your existing worldview. The same is true of broadcast and

cable news sources. Political conservatives never have to encounter a fact or opinion that

will make them uncomfortable. Nor, though to a lesser extent, do liberals. Is it any

wonder that the U.S. is as divided politically as it is? There is ample evidence from the

psychological literature that even when confronted with balanced information, people are

capable of distorting or discounting the information they disagree with and bolstering

views they already have. But at least in such a world, people are <u>exposed</u> to the

disagreeable information, and some of it, sometimes, for some folks, gets through. In the

modern world, there is no reason for anyone to subject him or herself to such exposure

(see Sunstein, 2001 for elaboration).

The prominence of filtering driven by extraordinary amounts of choice tells us

something important. Our cultural experiences will only be as diverse as the filters we

use to help us select them. With all that is available to us, unmediated browsing is

impossible. We are more reliant on filters now than we ever were before. We couldn't

get through a day without them. What this means, I think, is that an honest appraisal of

cultural variety <u>as experienced</u> requires an assessment of the filters people use. There is

great potential for diversity among filters: best-seller lists, local book clubs, arts and

cultural organizations, museums, broadcast and print book reviews. But unless people

are deliberate about the filters they use, their own cultural experiences will be anything

but diverse. And based upon what I indicated above about how paralyzing unlimited

choice can be, my suspicion is that in the realm of culture, the more options there are, the

more driven most people will be to settle on the most choice-simplifying filters they can

find.

There is an additional point to be made about potential paradoxical effects of

choice on the cultural life of the nation. When choice gets overwhelming, it can turn

"choosers" into "pickers." The distinction I'm after with these terms is meant to capture

differences in how active and engaged people are as they make their decisions.

"Choosers" are active: they interrogate their own goals and critically evaluate how well

the various options enable them to meet those goals. Choosing is work; it takes time,

attention, and effort. But it bears fruit: real depth of involvement with the options, and an

occasional discovery that none of the options does the job, and that you will have to

invent your own. "Picking" is much more passive. You lie on your couch as options

come by on a metaphorical conveyor belt, and you pick one that appeals to you. Pickers

won't be interrogating their goals. They won't be saying "none of the above" to the

options they are presented with. We are all pickers some of the time, when, for example,

after a hard day of work, we flop on the couch and channel surf until we find something

tolerable to watch. When we're feeling exhausted in this way, we won't turn off the TV

if nothing decent is on and read a book. My fear is that overwhelming options turns all of

us into pickers, at least much of the time. If so, it is having an effect that is the opposite

of engagement with the life of our society. The paradox is that the more diverse and

vibrant cultural offerings become, the more passive and stereotyped the selectors of those

offerings become.

      A recent laboratory study illustrates how increased choice can induce people to

"choose" less and "pick" more. Atre and Katz (2005) exposed participants to choices

among five or 25, 30-minute television shows. Participants were to choose two shows to

watch. With the larger choice set, fewer participants chose to watch news shows than

with the small choice set. In addition, there was more genre rigidity in the second show

they chose to watch, that is, an increase in show availability resulted in a <u>decrease</u> in the

diversity of show selection. When the choice set was expanded, the kind of self-scrutiny

that might characterize a chooser (eg., "what do I want to experience now?") seemed to

be replaced by inertia. To buttress this empirical evidence, Nagler (2005) has recently

made a theoretical case that as the number of internet options grows, people will

increasingly rely on "branding" (ie., the presence of the internet outlet in another

medium, for example CNN or ESPN) to help them make selections, so that the internet

will, in effect, become an echo of other media rather than an independent alternative to

them. With so many possibilities available, a truly informed selection becomes difficult

if not impossible. One might be able to find out about some of the options, but not about

all of them. Instead, consumers fall back on a variety of labor-saving heuristics (eg.,

"stay with what you've got unless you don't like it," in the case of show selection, or "go

with what you know" in the case of the internet and branding) which "solve" the choice

problem by making them much more passive decision makers.

Perhaps more troubling than the possibility that overwhelming choice turns people into relatively passive decision makers is the additional possibility that this passivity will carry over into the way they interact with whatever they have chosen. The distinction Peterson and Rossman (this volume) make between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" nicely captures what I have in mind. As Peterson and Rossman suggest, I think the real force of the highbrow/lowbrow distinction lies less in the kinds of cultural objects people choose than in the orientation people take to those objects. "Lowbrow" patrons are passive consumers of culture, whether it be the symphony or a sitcom. They sit in their seats and say "entertain me." "Highbrow" patrons are actively engaged with the culture they experience. They think about it, they feel it, they talk about it, they bond with one another over it, they interpret it, and they are changed by it. To the extent that culture has positive effects on a society, it is surely only when people bring a "highbrow" orientation to it.

To illustrate the consequences of this distinction, several years ago, I discovered that the extremely thoughtful, critical students I teach at Swarthmore had a striking tendency to shut all that critical engagement down when they went to the movies. Commercial movies were meant to be a diversion—a break from the hard work of critical analysis that they did in their classes. What I realized was that even as my colleagues and I were struggling to help our students be thoughtful about the world, powerful conceptions of human nature and social life were being slipped into their heads, like fluoride in a community water supply, while their guards were down. So with a colleague I taught a course that included a mainstream commercial movie every week, just to try to nurture the habit in students of bringing the same critical attitude to the

things they encountered when they were "recreating" as they did when they were

"studying." This little exercise worked, at least for the duration of the semester. I don't

know whether it worked for the long term. And I fear that it can't work when people are

faced with the cultural variety that now confronts us every day. I fear that passive choice

heuristics will feed into passive engagement with the experiences that have been chosen.

So to summarize the paradoxes of choice overload in culture, when people are

overloaded they will:

- Opt for the same old thing as a way to avoid facing unlimited options.

- Rely on filters rather than on themselves.

- Become more passive in their participation in cultural life.

And if what I said above about choice in the material domain is true of culture as

 well, people will <u>also</u> get less satisfaction out of the cultural choices they make, and they

will increasingly opt out all together.

How Many "Cultures"?

None of the claims I just made is good news, but I think there is even worse news.

I fear that the explosion of cultural diversity threatens what culture is for. Culture is the

language of Habermas' "public sphere" (eg., Habermas, 1989). For it to be an effective

language, all participants in the public sphere must "speak" it. But all the diversity that is

now available means that no one has to speak a language he or she doesn't like. Cultural

variety means that we can respond to dissatisfaction with "exit"—abandon this TV

station, magazine, newspaper, or musician, and patronize that one instead (an especially

significant recent example of exit as a response to cultural dissatisfaction is the

development of a Christian entertainment industry that is quickly extending to all popular

media). A more compelling and useful response to dissatisfaction is "voice" rather than

exit. We speak up in an effort to change the cultural institutions we don't like. Conner

(this volume) makes the illuminating point that in ancient Greece, patrons responded to

what we would now call "high culture" in the way modern Americans respond to sporting

events. Audience "participation" was the norm. Giving literal "voice" was what a

theatergoer did.

    "Voice" takes much more work than "exit," but it has within it the seeds of

cultural transformation. Will people be willing to do the work? When cultural

possibilities are limited, there isn't much alternative to voice because there aren't

infinitely many options we can select instead of one we find unsatisfying. There are only

so many channels we can change to. But when the options are bountiful, exit becomes

much more attractive.

The distinguished economic historian Albert Hirschman (1970) initially made this

distinction between "exit" and voice" almost forty years ago. His point, at that time, was

that the characteristic response to dissatisfaction in the marketplace is exit, whereas the

characteristic response to dissatisfaction in the public sphere is voice—expressed as

political or cultural participation. By creating such cultural variety, we are turning

culture into a market commodity (no matter who is paying for it). Rather than being an

instrument of political and social engagement, it is becoming an item of consumption.

For example, when there were three television networks, parents who were dismayed at

the quality and quantity of programming available for young children had to organize to

demand better. Now, each family can make independent decisions about which of

dozens of stations just for kids are acceptable. Children's television is no longer a political issue.

And I have a second, related fear. A significant function of cultural objects and events is to make people uncomfortable, as Pierre Bourdieu (eg., 1984) has observed. People can become uncomfortable with the way they are living their lives, with the way others are living, with what is taught to their children in the schools, with what their government is doing in their name, and so on. But few of us are masochistic enough to seek out discomfort. We experience it because we can't avoid it. And it changes us (or we change the things that caused it). But nowadays, we can avoid discomfort. Nowadays, we need never confront a disagreeable fact, an unsettling image, a challenging piece of music, or an angry dramatic representation of the world we live in. Each of us can find our own, individually tailored version of Huxley's soma. This is just another face of the distinction between exit and voice, and it threatens to make culture a very blunt instrument indeed for providing insight into ourselves, broadening our insight into others, and energizing us to promote social change. And this is the ultimate paradox: cultural pluralism leading to individual isolation, and cultural energy leading to individual passivity. This will also threaten some of the pleasures of participating in culture, so many of which derive from being a member of a community of participants (Dimaggio, this volume; Ostrower, this volume).

So How Many Flowers, and Who Decides?

If the arguments I have made are persuasive, we should be thinking about how to limit the range of cultural possibilities, in the service both of individual empowerment

and collective democratic participation. The very possibility of limitation raises two questions: how much, and by whom? The latter question is especially troubling. It's one thing to limit the number of cereals available for purchase (though why would one bother). But when it comes to culture—to First Amendment activities—everyone gets (appropriately) nervous. Nonetheless, I think this is an issue that has to be faced.

I can dispense with the first question—how many choices—quickly. No one knows. I think the only way to know you have enough is to experience too much. We now experience too much. A novel every thirty seconds is too much. Three-hundred TV channels is too much. In both cases, and in virtually all others, less is more. But there is certainly no "magic number" of cultural options that will bring us all the benefits of cultural diversity with none of the costs.

The second question—who decides—is much thornier.   At the moment, with respect to mass culture, we seem to have only a single decision maker—the market. The market has some virtues. It is, at least potentially, an expression of the popular will. People get what they want. They vote with their dollars or their remotes. But the market has only a single criterion for doing its filtering—profitability—and even if that's a legitimate criterion, it shouldn't be the only one. Further, as we have seen in the decades since the Reagan deregulation revolution, now reaching its apotheosis in the reign of George Bush, without state intervention, massive power to control culture rests in very few hands. The market is an efficient mechanism for providing some of society's goods, but not all of them. And culture is one domain that needs to be (at least partially) protected from the market rather than provided by it.

With respect to "elite" culture, there are alternatives to the market, in the form of

nonprofit arts organizations, universities, museums, libraries, community book clubs,

theater groups, and the like. Institutions like these can provide a diverse and helpful set

of filters, and they require and deserve significant public support. But two questions arise

with respect to these various, mediating cultural institutions. First, can they participate

more actively in filtering the mainstream cultural productions that have been left entirely

to the market? And second, do they need to change the <u>way</u> in which they filter to

accommodate the modern explosion of choice?

I have nothing useful or optimistic to say about the first question—about whether

and how nonprofit arts institutions that are already struggling to pay the bills can take on

the market behemoth. On the contrary, I think the powerlessness of nonprofit institutions

in the face of the market has led many of them to make decisions about their own

programming that exacerbate the choice problem rather than ameliorating it. Under

financial pressure to "put backsides in the seats," longer seasons, with programs that aim

to appeal to everybody, have become the trend. They offer patrons more to choose from,

not less. Taking on the market in the world of popular culture is, at best, a question for

long-term consideration.

It is the second question, I think, that can benefit from reflection in the short term.

Nonprofit cultural institutions have always been both sources of cultural diversity and

filters of that diversity. Though they have taken both of these roles quite seriously, the

emphasis in these institutions, in recent years, has been on promoting diversity, a

refreshing change, perhaps, from their historic, stodgy past. For example, nonprofit

theaters prefer doing premieres to doing second productions (Tepper, personal

communication). And funders prefer supporting something new to continuing to support what they have supported in the past. But I think, in response to the choice problem, the time has come for the pendulum to swing back again, and for these institutions to step up as our guides in the overwhelming cultural landscape that is modernity by focusing more on filtering diversity than on creating it. They should think about concentrating what they offer rather than diluting it. They should think about putting lower value on novelty for its own sake. They should think about reaching out to one another and pooling resources with the aim of creating fewer but grander cultural productions that capture the attention of a larger public. And they should think about encouraging their patrons to be choosers rather than pickers by engaging patrons in the programming process.

The university is instructive here. In the big battles over the "canon" that marked the peak of the culture wars almost thirty years ago, the university was forced to liberalize its filters and admit a broader range of possibilities into its club. All the fresh air that blew into the academy caused people to lose their balance. Though it was never true, despite the hysterical complaints of cultural conservatives, that "everything went," it was true, at least in my view, that too much went. In certain corners of the university, people lost Walker Percy's (1975) distinction between "knowledge" and "news," and universities became repositories of the latest thing. In recent years, I think there has been considerable self-correction. The curriculum has recovered some structure, there is some continuity from one year to the next, attention is paid to the staying power of texts and other cultural phenomena, and students have a better sense of where the things they study fit into the global cultural landscape. I assume (and hope) that we won't go back to the stultifying days of old, but we seem to be regaining some cultural equilibrium.

The university has corrected itself, but not without help. It was the target of massive criticism. Citizens gave voice to their concerns and forced the university to reevaluate what it was doing. This voice was essential, and is in general essential for institutions to be able to develop in ways that are promising. This is why I see the potential substitution of exit for voice that is accompanying our modern cultural profusion as so troubling.

So whereas it is extremely important for universities and other cultural institutions to be open to novelty and innovation, it is just as essential that they take their responsibilities as filters—as selectors—very seriously. Sacrificing either good for the other will serve neither culture nor society. It is important that each of us reads different books, so that we can educate one another. But it is also important that we read at least some books in common, so that the process of education has a platform from which to begin.

This conclusion may seem self-evident, but I think it suggests a shift in focus of attention in a world of endless choice that is not so obvious. The philosopher Daniel Dennett (1975) once wrote that "it takes two to create anything." What he meant was that creativity requires both someone to <u>generate</u> novelty and someone to <u>select</u> from that novelty the bits that are actually worthwhile. This model of creativity is based on the way creativity happens in nature—natural selection. Random genetic recombination and mutation generate novelty, and reproductive effectiveness selects from that novelty.

Society has its generators and its selectors, people who seem to specialize in one component of creativity or the other. But in truth, both the generator and the selector live in each of our heads, dividing the labor. Dennett asks which of these components of

creativity is the "real" creator. And his answer is that it depends. When novelty is

scarce, most of the heavy lifting has to be done by the generator. But when novelty is

pervasive, the burden falls on the selector. We most often think of creativity as the

generation of novelty. The "selectors"—the editors, critics, program directors, creators

of syllabi, and so on—are the enemies of creativity. I think, with Dennett, that this is a

mistaken view in general, but I think it is especially mistaken in the modern world.

Cultural creativity crucially depends on the process of selection. It depends on diverse,

discerning, and engaged filters. In the modern world, all of our cultural experiences will

have to be mediated by someone or something. And if we want a vibrant and creative

culture, we need to cultivate vibrant and creative filters. In the modern world, I believe,

it is in the process of selection where the key to creativity lies.

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