

capital-
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and
convenience

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Capitalism and Convenience
by Spencer Byrne-Seres

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Capitalism and Convenience

1. The Ronco Showtime Rotisserie and Barbeque

Growing up I didn't have cable. Our house had a massive antenna that was fixed to the roof with guy lines, and managed to pick up about 10 stations. We lived in a valley, so even with this array we never had great reception. I resented our lack of cable as a child and I was always longing to be in the know regarding TV shows and inside jokes. I craved Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, Discovery Channel, MTV. But they were always just out of my grasp, at a friend's house, at grandma's house, everywhere but where I grew up.

My solution to this problem was to watch just as much TV as I would if I did have cable. I loved television, I was glued to the television. Sick days, Saturday afternoons, summer vacation, late at night, I persisted even in the darkest hours of daytime soap operas. The gravest threat my parents could level at me for misbehaving was the loss of TV privileges.

My passion for television led to a passion for infomercials. These were the programs that came on at one in the morning, or in the afternoons when most stations played soap operas. Infomercials were used to fill dead airtime at the end of sports broadcasts, and carried stations from

the end of primetime until the morning shows the next day. I think infomercials were probably my first exposure to sales, and the act of selling things, and as such defined consumerism for me through slogans, financing plans, and countdown clocks. I absorbed countless products' slogans and catchphrases: the Miracle Blade Two ("you can fillet a fillet"), the Magic Bullet ("what can you do in 10 seconds?"), and the ShamWow ("You'll be saying wow everytime"). Infomercials were the final frontier for real inventors. It was where an idea lived or died, where innovation, "life hacks", and solutions were presented.

At the top of the heap was the Ronco Showtime Rotisserie Barbeque, which was basically a rotating toaster oven with a timer. It's tag line was "you set it and forget it," a beautiful distillation of our desire for easiness. I watched this infomercial probably 100 times or more over the years, knowing it would begin with a pitch from the inventor Ron Popeil for a magic hair spray that covered bald spots. The infomercial would then explain society's lack of time and inability to eat well, and present the oven as a solution. A whole chicken could be roasted in under an hour. A basket could hold salmon cakes or burgers. A lidded crock could be placed on top of the toaster to warm canned vegetables such a peas and corn. All of these nuances and details were earnest and honest. Ron really believed in his invention.

Infomercials taught me to look critically at objects in order to see their value. They taught me about ingenuity and the power of a single good idea. Their commentary on modern life was a brilliant abstraction, distilling our age of anxiety into consumable solutions. Weirdly, the vocabulary I learned through infomercials is an artist's vocabulary:

observe the world, process it, reflect it into objects or ideas,
offer potential futures, and then try to sell it.



2. Rocks for Sale

The street that I lived on during my childhood in Santa Fe was both a dirt road and an active arroyo. Every August the “monsoon” season would come to Northern New Mexico and the rains would turn our road into a small river. Flash floods would occasionally wash away cars, and friends would get stranded at my house because their parents wouldn’t want to brave the drive upstream. Eventually, the water would recede, leaving an eroded river bed in place of a road, and about twice a month the city would grade it back to normalcy. I watched this cycle of erosion from a small stand I would set up in our driveway: four cinder blocks stacked in twos would form the legs, and a few old boards would create the table on which I sold rocks.

Growing up in New Mexico, rocks were in no short supply. My particular yard was full of them, and they seemed like a sensible thing to sell. I imagine I was inspired by a trip to

buy flagstone with my dad. We rode in his truck to this one corner on the outskirts of town to buy from the vendors who sold not only flagstone, but mossrock, coyote fencing, and other landscaping materials they harvested from the areas surrounding Santa Fe. The rocks I sold at my stand were smaller than those of the corner sellers, but I had an eye for rose quartz and weird colored rocks that I would sell at a premium. One rock took me two days to unearth from the hard soil of our driveway. I priced the football sized lump at eight dollars, thinking the toil and particular color should translate to a higher value. But my main customer, Kim, thought this price a little too high. I wasn't savvy enough to haggle and politely held firm, losing the sale in the end. Another time a customer drove by and asked if I had a green rock, which I did, and was able to sell for two dollars.

These stands, whether selling rocks or lemonade, are part of the iconic American childhood: a typically white, suburban image of an enterprising child. Kids go out and learn the value of a dollar, saving money for whatever toy or treat their parents are unable or unwilling to provide. These stands represent a young individual's first attempts at capitalism. Like learning language or learning to walk, learning capitalism is a set of naive attempts to see and mimic what is happening around you. Along with other

milestones such as an allowance, a first job, and a first credit card, the lemonade stand is one of those moments that moved me from childhood into a capitalist reality. These experiments taught me to think about my body, my time, and my possessions in terms of dollars. The lemonade stand had a less cynical side as well. Spending afternoons in my driveway, I learned about my neighbors, about the dogs that roamed up and down the street, and the other children riding their bikes to and fro. I was a visible person in a community for the first time, alone and defining a space for myself. The lemonade stand has a capacity for interaction and relationship building, despite its capitalist overtures. Through the stand I began to think about my street, and the people who lived on it.

3. My First Yard Sale (Communism)



When I turned about eight, my attention turned from resource extraction (the harvesting of rocks from my backyard to sell in the front yard) to other exploits. My small rock stand shifted from a convenience store/rockhound model into a sort of thrift store/yard sale format where I would sell old toys and random nicknacks I had collected over the years and no longer loved. The summer of yard sales was also the summer my mom hosted a camp at our house for the kids of some of our family's friends. It was decided that one day we would hold a joint yard sale, with kids bringing whatever they wanted to include. The day of the sale we made signs and set up small stands to display our offerings. Kids would stand in the road and compel drivers to stop and take a look. Our road was a dead end, so there wasn't much traffic.

By the end of the day, we had amassed about 32 dollars, the majority of which had come from selling my collection of doll furniture. I loved the miniature furniture and would create rooms and houses with it, but by this age I was probably bored or embarrassed by it, thinking it not boyish enough. I sold each piece for one to two dollars to a neighbor, for a total of 18 dollars. Over the course of the day, we sold a few more things, but nothing quite as notable as the furniture. When it came time to divvy out

money, I assumed that I would get all the money I had made from the sale of my things. Instead, to my surprise, my mom decided we would split the money evenly among all the kids.

I understand my mom's choice in making that call: we had all participated in the yard sale, so why not just share the money we made. It also allowed us take a trip to Baskin-Robbins so we could each spend our hard earned dollars on a cool treat. My mom had redistributed the wealth. Just like with lemonade stands, lawn mowing, allowances, and other kid-run proto-capitalist enterprises, our yard sale was subject to miniaturized versions of macro economies. She chose to value everyone and the group as a whole, rather than piecing out our profits proportionally. From an adult's perspective, it was only thirty dollars. Minor compared to the debt, mortgages, bills and everyday life they navigated. But it radically redefined my economy, my agency, and my understanding of wealth. I was bitter about this, and I felt like I had lost out. My furniture, which had been my furniture, was now everybody's gain. At the time I wasn't able to see any value in such a choice.

Thinking about it now, the whole experience helped to make bonds between those that participated. It was probably my first experience collaborating with a group, something I do regularly now. It was the first time I had to decide things with other people, and together we did something that would not have been possible alone. It also helped that everybody walked away with ice cream.

4. Cliff's Liquors

Every Friday at the end of the day, my mom and I would go to Cliff's Liquors. Cliff's was a liquor store that was the closest place between my elementary school, where my mom worked, and home. It was our weekly treat, when I was permitted a rare bag of junk potato chips and a soda, which my parents had kept away from me for most of my childhood. My favorite combination was a bag of Funyuns and a bottle of YooHoo. If I was lucky, my mom would also let me buy a small plastic canister of Lucas Limesalt, normally a rim salt for Margaritas, but something I loved to eat by pouring it into my palm and then licking it one fingerful at a time.

The corner store was one of the few stores that we went to regularly that wasn't a large supermarket or chain. It was part of a routine. The owners knew us by name, and usually knew what kind of wine my mom would get or what kind of beer my dad would buy. It was one of the first stores that I understood to be owned by people: Albertson's, Sonic, and other larger chains were too abstract. We did the same things in them, principally buying things, but they were lit differently, had rationalized layouts, clear checkout lines, and uniforms. They were optimized.

Cliff's was jammed into an old adobe house. The whole store was two small rooms crammed with bottles of wine, walk in coolers, and hand-drawn signs. They sold self-serve tamales and single cigarettes. Cliff's felt like my lemonade stand scaled up to adult proportions, and I think it was an important part of the neighborhood. Although Cliff's sold things, it didn't feel like a place defined by profit or success. It defied, and continues to defy, the rising home values of the area. It served as a meeting place and a landmark. It wasn't a place where people loitered, but it was a place where people stopped on their way home. It was part of the neighborhood's routine, a commonplace that connected houses, families and individuals, whether directly or indirectly. Cliff's taught me how a store can play a role in a community.



5. Apples to Zinfandel

The first corner store that I really became acquainted with as an adult was the Belmont Market, a corner store a block away from my house on 35th and Belmont in Southeast Portland. The most notable part of the Belmont Market is its mural, stating the phrase “Apples to Zinfandel” in a bizarre font, with abstracted grocery items floating about. The mural is not striking, but rather quietly strange, and it took me years to notice and appreciate it. Otherwise, the building and store are like many of the other corner stores

in Portland. There are a couple apartments overhead, and there was even a pay phone on the street up until about 2013.

The market is basically a large room with three aisles of items, and two walls of mismatching coolers. Right at the entrance is a low wall, which forms one side of the cashier area that overlooks the whole store. On it one can usually find advertisements for bands, local meetings, piano lessons and the sort. To the right of the entrance is a microwave for anyone to use, as well as stacks of free periodicals. Over the years I went there for cigarettes, beer, junk food, stamps, flu medicine, Kleenex, condoms, gatorade, ice cream, dice, stationery, thumb tacks, motor oil, charcoal, candy, sunblock, and even once for a hat. The same 900-square foot store is a source for both the daily and the irregular. I knew where everything was because I had looked over every shelf a million times.

I also knew the owners, though never by name. The couple that ran the store were there from morning until midnight every day. As was custom, we could comment on how it was too hot or too cold or too rainy. And then maybe we might mention something we saw on the street outside, or about how soon we were getting off of work. The space behind the register was their living room, and they were often both there watching TV on a computer, or watching the Blazers game. I ran into people I knew there, and we would chat and comment on the same things. I could also go in and not say a word, simply buy what I needed and leave. The owners of a corner store see people at their best and their worst, their most routine and their most out of whack.

The Belmont Market, like Cliff's Liquors, does not scream profit or success. It is messy, poorly lit, and oddly organized. You can tell what get sold once an hour, once a week, and once a year by the amount of dust it carries. You can follow the worn lines on the old linoleum towards the cheap beer section. There is no pressure to buy, and no pressure to sell. The corner store simply exists as part of the infrastructure, part of the fabric of the neighborhood. Bars and boutique stores continue to come and go, but the Belmont Market just is.

6. The Kelly Lake Store

The first time that I began to associate art with convenience stores was reading Kelly Lake Store by Chris Kraus. The art project, in the form of a short essay, proposed to buy and run a rural country store as just that: a rural country store. The Kelly Lake Country Store had gone out of business a year earlier, and Kraus wanted to take the funds from a Guggenheim Fellowship and revive the store to the point where it was sustainable. Kraus observes that the disappearance of these stores is part of the erosion of rural towns: "Small local business is the lifeblood of every community. The diners, cafes, and coffee shops between Grand Rapids and Hibbing, once informal town centers, have all closed." Much like Cliff's Liquors in Santa Fe, corner stores, country stores, and bodegas are integral to community in small towns and large cities.

According to Kraus' proposal, no art performances or exhibitions were to be held within the store, but rather art students would come and work in the store as clerks and gas station attendants. I understood this as an attempt to negate art in any conventional sense while affirming artists. It was the first time I had associated corner stores with an art context, and reading Kelly Lake Store began to reorient my values as an artist and a citizen. There is immense value in these spaces, and artists can learn from this value through participation. How might it reorient our understanding of the world to sit behind the counter of a gas station for ten hours? One where you know the regulars, and where you get a sense of the neighborhood?

The proposal for Kelly Lake Store offers up a sort of noble lemonade stand. The only terms of success are sustainability, and the daily process is everything. The noble lemonade stand does not seek to grow or profit. It does not seek to exploit or colonize. It's role is to serve a community, to provide basic needs and common space. The noble lemonade stand is nostalgic and idealistic, it's leisurely and utopian. It's boring in a radical way.

7. Convenience

I find myself living in a new neighborhood now. I've been investigating the corner stores that are closest to me, and thinking about how I first engage with a community. Two blocks away from me is the Food Fair, a rather large building with a squat yellow sign. There is a small parking lot along one side of the building, and a shopping cart at the front of the store where they collect recycling. At the back of the store you can find jars of homemade Kimchi, and there is a food warmer stocked with jojos, fried chicken, and bean and cheese burritos. The Food Fair is where I buy beer and candy, toilet paper and toothpaste. It has also provided me with my first anecdotes about the neighborhood. It's the first place I walked to from my house. It's the closest common space and the most visible.

Corner stores are transactional places. Goods are exchanged for money, items are leant, food is prepared and eaten, regulars carry tabs. Looks are exchanged, smells are shared, nods given to people you don't know but see everyday.

Matches are given out for free or sometimes for 10 cents. We are always trading something for convenience. We are always paying to make things easier. And at the heart of the corner store is convenience. We need certain things quickly and easily, and corner stores are the first place we turn. But I wonder why we pay. I wonder why the cash register is the focal point of a store. It's not because corner stores make money, but rather cash is the easiest way to trade. What if we abandoned cash? What if we eliminated money from the equation? What would it take for a neighborhood to support free convenience? Where would the transaction lie?

In writing this book, I was thinking of laying out a sort of business plan, or rather an un-business plan for what my dream corner store might look like. And, similar to the Kelly Lake Store, I realize I have nothing to add on to what already exists. The corner store is untouchable because it seems to work, and it persists. Corner stores anchor neighborhoods and communities because they are easy to get to, they are convenient. The Food Fair and other corner stores function not only as this infrastructural place for things, but an emotional resource. When my roommate gets sick I go there to buy them Gatorade, when I'm feeling

sad I can buy ice cream. The convenience that corner stores offer is one of safety and reliability. They strengthen communities just by being open.

I do fear that the 7Elevens and Plaid Pantry's might force out the smaller stores. I worry that these rational, profit oriented spaces will displace those grittier, more personal spaces such as the Belmont Market and the Food Fair. This worry leaves me with one final question. One that I ask myself as an artist dreaming about corner stores. I worry that the emotional needs, the personal interactions, the sense of community, of specificity and place, are all tied to these local business which do seem to be slowly evaporating. How can we concretize a space where the needs of a community might be met? One where we can buy ice cream, tampons, and paper cups?



