

Keeping the Bewildered Herd Bewildered: The American Constitution Center

“The most insidious and potent forms of censorship are not those enforced by an official ban, but those freely assumed by individuals and institutions. In “democratic” societies, such as the United States, whose bill of rights protects the abstract freedom of its citizens, the coercive power of the state does not simply reside within its annexation of the right to force, but within the capacity of its institutions, to paraphrase George Orwell’s famous preface to *Animal Farm*, to produce citizens that voluntarily silence unpopular ideas and obscure inconvenient facts. The most effective forms of social control do not derive from the imposition of external constraints (the police, the law, the military), but from those institutional mechanisms through which, as Walter Lippmann put it, consent is manufactured.

The dominant function of cultural institutions, especially institutions as well funded as the American Constitution Center, despite their stated



aims, is not to produce a critical debate, dialogue, etc. concerning, in this case, the historical legacy of the constitution, but to actively shape its reception and interpretation. The center serves to affirm the dominant consensus concerning America’s image, providing a framework for “lively” debates that not only remain within, but help establish, the acceptable range of differing opinion within public discourse. Such institutions (whether public or private) thus serve the ideological, if not overtly propagandistic function, of shaping the American social imaginary by actively working to elide those damaging truths that threaten to puncture the armature of prevailing orthodoxy.

For all those in doubt as to whether the center’s central vocation is civic education or public relations, the multi-media presentation *Freedom Rising* quickly decides the matter. Serving to introduce visitors to the museum’s “vision of popular sovereignty embodied in the Constitution’s opening words, ‘We the People,’” the performance serves as a pep rally for the apathetic, its desperate enthusiasm an unconvincing ritual in the clichés of American self-congratulation. American history since the revolution is treated as the progressive unfolding of the idea of freedom. The motor of this development is none other than the constitution itself, which, as the voice of the people, singularly bestows the freedoms as if the intense social struggles that populate America’s material history were merely the occasional cause.

Historical details that don’t fit the narrative of self-congratulation are either repressed or treated as minor hiccups. Injustices too glaring to be outrightly occluded, such as the extermination of the indigenous population and slavery, are treated as minor blemishes powerless to tarnish the upward tide of freedom’s march. The conception of history on offer is so patently idealist it would even make the most hackneyed of Hegelian wretch.

The blind will to hold “popular sovereignty” above all forms of social antagonism would be less noxious if it did not end up equating civic liberty and the free exercise of political will with enjoyment. In the words of the narrator, “The common man was finally getting a say and enjoying every minute of

it.” The image of the common man put forward is certainly not that embodied by the Wobblies or the participants of the Haymarket riots. It is rather the image of Market Man.

The sense of equality bestowed by the constitution, as the American Constitution Center would have it, amounts to a kind of “egalitarian dogmatism” that Alain Badiou has described as the “equality vis-à-vis the commodity.” The exercise of freedom in the contemporary democratic world and that the constitution now protects is quite simply that of consumption: “In principle, anybody and everybody is posited as being equal to everybody else, as being able to buy whatever is being sold as a matter of right.”

Needless to say, this is not the vision of the citizen of the authors of the *Federalist*. At a minimum, they conceived of the citizen as a socially active agent guided by the universality of reason, not a passive consumer driven by its animal passions. One could perhaps argue that the interactive nature of the permanent exhibit tries to actively solicit the spectator to imagine him or herself within the various roles of the executive, judicial or legislative branches of government and thus stimulate an interest in the participatory process of government. Yet, the varied technologically sophisticated solicitations are calculated to generate the *feeling* of participation. The rather peculiar question that confronts museum goers towards the end of the exhibit—when do you feel free?—reveals the cynical and vile assumption underlying the exhibition. Contemporary democracy is a matter of psychopharmacology. It is not a question of *being* free, but *feeling* free.

The center’s attempt to simulate political participation reveals the truth of contemporary democracy as essentially an imaginary adventure, where the once potent and convulsive reality of a government by the people for the people now seems like a cruel hoax—a hoax that could hardly be sustained without the colossal efforts of institutions such as the Constitution Center which perpetuate the contemporary belief that politics is a matter managing the daily routine of consumption.

Most interesting in this regard is the simulation of the presidential inauguration that enables exhibition visitors to imagine themselves president by having them act out the ritual of being inaugurated. Standing in front of a fake presidential podium, the voice of the chief justice begins the inaugural pledge. A digital camera in front of the podium records the scene and projects it upon a green screen behind the podium. The actor is digitally inserted into a virtual scene that includes the chief justice, the stage and the audience. However, the illusion is maintained only if you play out the roll to the end. One cannot both play president and view oneself as the president on the screen behind. The fantasy is thus chiefly for those who are spectating and not for the one who plays out the role of sovereign, establishing the separation between the people and the executive at the same time that it conceals it. To compensate for this clear deficiency of not being able to see oneself as president, the museum store offers a free market solution that restores the circuit of specular consumption that was momentarily short-circuited: the opportunity to purchase the digital image of oneself as president. It is hard not to cherish the irony that even one’s imaginary presidency has to be bought.

For an institutions that dedicates itself to historical memory, it could learn much from the Brechtian maxim articulated by Walter Benjamin: “take your cue not from the good old things, but from the bad new ones.”

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