

Reciprocating Freely and Generously: the Relevance of Altruism in the 21st Century

Centuries ago, Benjamin Franklin set the foundation of the American identity, shepherded by his internal ideologies of altruism and reciprocity, serving others “freely and generously”. However, in today’s world, Franklin’s perception of ethical practices have been nullified, lost in the frequent immorality of our modern economic system. Rather than justify the capitalism that once embodied American individualism, reducing overconsumption and increasing larger collective goals will re-emphasize what reciprocity asserted in Colonial times: that we flourish when we give to each other.

In Franklin's era of injustice and tyrannical outcries, his contemporary invention, the phenomenon of an independent United States of America, unified a body of individuals for a single transcendent cause. The result was a new country mostly allowing reciprocal, vital inventions. Reciprocity's value certainly diminishes when a society allows legal slavery, disenfranchisement of women, and dehumanization of indigenous people. However, “great Advantages” were still produced and exchanged mutually, such as the efficiency-revolutionizing cotton gin and sewing machine. Essentially, society had not yet been influenced by modern laissez-faire economics, and that led to mutual benefit. Contributing “freely and generously” was second nature, as the binding objective was to move forward, independent of British control, as a single body.

Over two centuries later, the Spirit of ‘76, essentially a collective desire for reciprocity leading to larger social good, became obsolete through corrupt modern capitalism. Generally, today’s economy enforces quantity over quality and the pressure of competition, rather than the prospect of mutual progress, to guide inventions. More critical is the notion that consumerism has given way to overconsumption, and generous reciprocity has surrendered to manipulative practices. The development of fast-fashion embodies this present trend and ethical dilemma. This business practice refers to certain companies’ use of inexpensive labor and materials to manufacture a surplus of products with little expenditure, subsequently supporting a worldwide issue of consumer overconsumption. China-based company SHIEN is a known operator of these methods, and despite the fact that its workers are confined to poverty and inhumane working conditions, it has become the largest clothing retailer worldwide. This,

in essence, is the reality of fast fashion. Companies seize opportunities to market cyclical micro-trends that, like the clothes they export, are extremely temporary, and in turn maintain and grow business regardless of their unethical methods. However, SHIEN is not the sole perpetrator of this industry. In actuality, mainstream brands including Zara, Gap, and H&M are all guilty of using exploitative labor (primarily in Asia) to attract sizable profits with minimal liabilities, therefore emphasizing how the matter of reciprocity—or lack thereof—grows ever-pressing. Such companies ultimately do not act with altruistic intentions, eschewing ethical concerns while promoting product and price. Nevertheless, aiming to revert the economic system back to one reminiscent of Franklin's time should not be instituted as the most viable option. Rather, consumers must shift away from materialistic desires and demand better working conditions to help remedy the tragically overlooked human struggles of workers in Asia and across the globe.

Diminishing materialism in the modern world requires emphasizing a philosophy of minimalism, or “... reducing distractions to maximise more important pursuits” (Matsangou). A minimalist ideology will quell the culture of overconsumption by consumers, and consequently reduce profit margins for businesses built on unethical practices. Companies intent on being the antithesis of overconsumption have already emerged, like the clothing company Everlane. Unlike its fast-fashion counterparts, Everlane markets itself as a transparency-prioritizing brand working to combat overconsumption with sustainably and ethically made, yet affordable products. They aim to inspire many more companies to follow suit. Undoubtedly, healthier consumerism relies on rapid growth and proliferation of companies like Everlane. Minimalism embodies a mutually beneficial atmosphere for business owners and consumers, an atmosphere relevant and appealing in today’s terms.

Ultimately, while Franklin’s advocacy of a “free and generous” reciprocal system is valid within Franklin's era up through today, modern capitalism often thwarts its relevance. Our current economic model does not support reciprocity without financial or self-serving benefit. Hence, if altruistic reciprocity were to be reborn today in the profound sense comparable to Founding Father Ben Franklin’s vision, the

motivation of inventing for social progress—for the greater or common good—must take precedence over the individualistic nature of capitalism.

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