

How *Aggressive* became the new *Professional* & Why *Insecure* is the new *Secure* as a result

Last week I decreased my laptop's energy usage by activating ALPM (Aggressive Link Power Management). Is *aggressive* just a way of saying *active*, I wondered, one that sounds less contradictory in the context of saving energy? Or are there people who actually see aggression as a virtue nowadays? After all, in these days of the *charm offensive*, *aggressively priced* seems to have become the new *cheap*. A generation ago, consumers would surely have struggled to understand the meaning of an *aggressive price*, instead opting for the now almost old-fashioned phrase *attractively priced*. Focussing primarily on US society, this essay investigates some of the deeper changes associated with this etymological reversal, and at the paradox of why the more effort is spent on security, the less secure everyone gets.

Attractive pricing emphasises the appeal to the consumer, which – leaving Thorsten Veblen's artificially cultivated needs for another essay – is a cooperation between purchaser and manufacturer, a context in which *aggression* makes little sense, and would hardly seem to be something to boast about. *Aggressive pricing* springs from the concept of the *price war* – competition between producers for market domination. Why the wish to dominate the market? To increase income, of course – the question seems almost too naïve to bother asking, to the modern reader. However, markets didn't always work this way – when the market place was literal, rather than metaphorical, attempts to dominate it would have engendered opprobrium from the rest of the community. Some economists present Adam Smith as a prophetic advocate of the dog-eat-dog struggle that modern capitalism has become, but his writings show that he possessed a far less one-sided understanding:

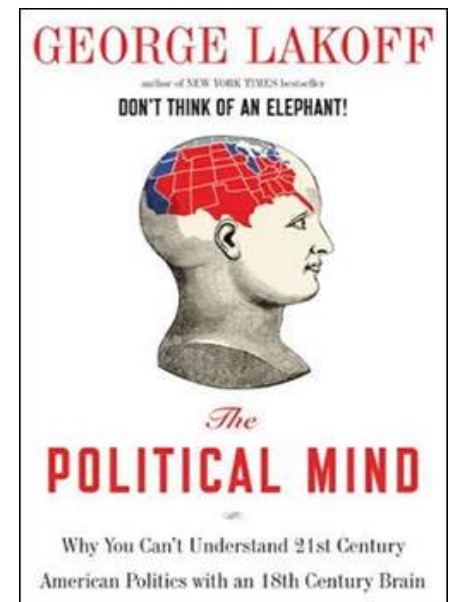
“It is thus that man, who can subsist only in society, was fitted by nature to that situation for which he was made. All the members of human society stand in need of each other's assistance, and are likewise exposed to mutual injuries. Where the necessary assistance is reciprocally afforded from love, from gratitude, from friendship, and esteem, the society flourishes and is happy. All the different members of it are bound together by the agreeable bands of love and affection, and are, as it were, drawn to one common centre of mutual good offices.

But though the necessary assistance should not be afforded from such generous and disinterested motives, though among the different members of the society there should be no mutual love and affection, the society, though less happy and agreeable, will not necessarily be dissolved. Society may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection; and though no man in it should owe any obligation, or be bound in gratitude to any other, it may still be upheld by a mercenary exchange of good offices according to an agreed valuation.

Society, however, cannot subsist among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another.”

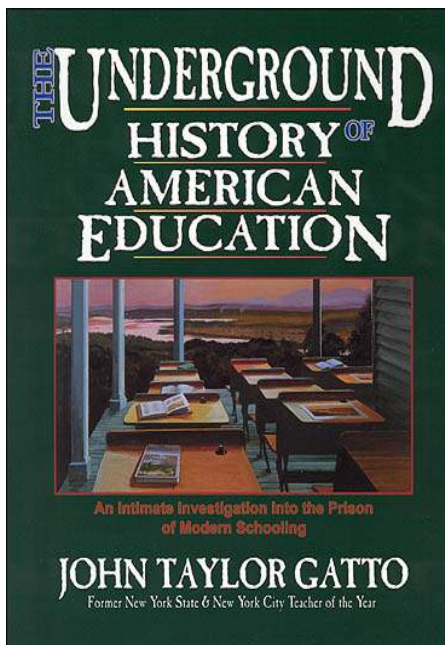
Adam Smith, Theory of Moral Sentiments, pp. 166-167

Why is this side to Adam Smith's worldview rarely mentioned? Whence the wish to dominate others? How, in the course of a generation, has *aggressively priced* become the new *attractively priced*? George Lakoff is a linguistics professor at UCB Berkeley. His book, *The Political Mind*, analyses contemporary US politics in terms of two competing views of the family. The US Republican Party appeals to what he terms a 'strict father' mentality. The strict father knows what is right, sees the world as a dangerous place in which only the toughest survive. He has a duty to punish his offspring's wrongdoing painfully enough to scare them into obedience, so that they will avoid the temptation to follow their own inherently sinful natures and instead adopt the strict father's moral



values. By contrast, Democrats tend to use the ‘nurturing parent’ metaphor, which sees the world as filled not with implacable competitors, but potential collaborators. Rather than punishment, children need relationships with a nurturing community, an inclusive and egalitarian society who share a common destiny. According to Professor Lakoff, the media and political establishments have been systematically moving US public discourse away from the nurturing parent towards the strict father metaphor in many areas. If a steadily more militarized popular culture is any expression of the public mood, the widely publicised teaching of creationism appears to have done little to challenge the deeper implications of Darwin's evolutionary theories. If the adrenaline pumped reporting of the “war on terror” influences the US public at all, the world for many US citizens does seem like a more dangerous and ruthless place than ever. If aggression is a necessary survival trait, *aggressive pricing* suddenly makes a lot more sense.

John Taylor Gatto is a former New York State Teacher of the Year, with 3 decades' experience of teaching and one of researching the history of forced schooling. His magnum opus, *The Underground History of American Education* details how US industrial leaders a century ago exploited Darwin's theories of evolution to justify their own vision of US as a competitive, stratified society directed by a wealthy elite:



“We want one class to have a liberal education. We want another class, a very much larger class of necessity, to forgo the privilege of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks.”

Woodrow Wilson, *addressing The New York City High School Teachers Association, Jan. 9th, 1909*

He exposes the hidden purpose of mass compulsion schooling in US, one which it still serves to this day, limiting citizens' imagination and inculcating subservience to authority. The American Dream, he writes, was redefined from independence – having an independent livelihood – to the consumption of mass-produced goods. School, he writes, destroys local values and cooperation, and “teaches children to hate one another, not to love them.” Certification hierarchies were introduced for previously unlicensed vocations, and competition for the few positions towards the top of these power hierarchies was naturalised. Examinations measure obedience and encourage competition rather than cooperation.

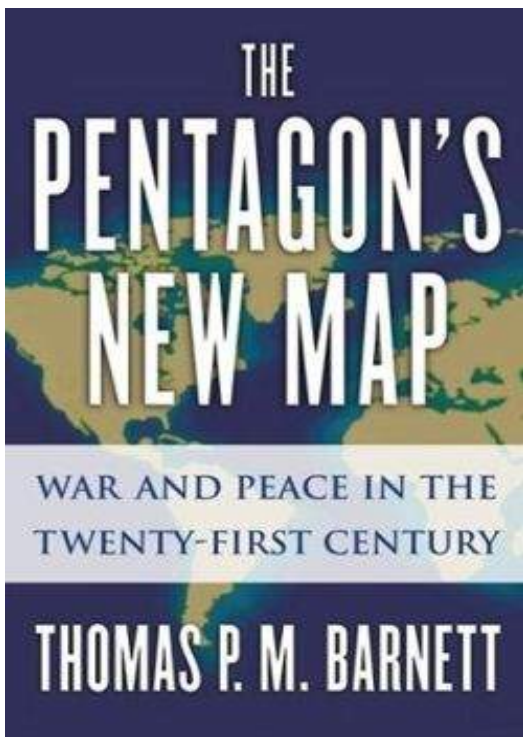
I am old enough to have charted the rise and rise of *professionalism*. I learnt the word in the 1970s, when watching professional golf. Professionals, my father explained, earned their living doing something, so were therefore better at it than amateurs, who played golf only for the love of it. Before we get into the burgeoning of professionalism, ask yourself, would you like to live in a world in which acts were carried out with utmost professionalism or would you rather that amateurs kept a foothold? If you're under 40, or have worked in a business environment, the question might seem strange. What virtue can there be in unprofessional conduct? Well, what if every dispute were resolved by paid professionals? No arguing the rights and wrongs, but both parties submitted a videotape to their higher ups to adjudicate. The US, with more lawyers per capita than any other country, is leading the charge in this direction. Since the infamous McDonald's coffee case, the label “caution: extremely hot” has become ubiquitous on hot drinks. Are consumers any safer for the warning on packets of peanuts that state that they “may contain nuts”. Such distractions and many more like them are surely to be expected if lawyers are left to call the shots. When was the last time you heard the oft repeated maxim of my youth, that “accidents happen”?

What if *every* human activity were organised strictly for profit? What effect would it have on human relationships to be separated hundreds of times a day into winners (who get paid) and losers (who do the

paying). Privatisation has been much discussed and is as obvious as the logos on TV screens, road signs and text books. Professionalisation of the social sphere on the other hand has been a harder sell, so progress has been more gradual and lower profile than that of industries that were formerly publicly-owned. Nevertheless, once the public accepted the principle of legislative governance of private affairs had been established, the law has proved a powerful wedge to split bonds of community and mutual trust. New markets have been created by monetising activities formerly done for free. Media scare campaigns accompany talk of improving standards and usher in wave after wave of licensing and certifying hierarchies, expanding the remit of lawyers whilst erecting legal, social and psychic barriers between people.

Some US schools are paying their attendees to pass exams! Care of children and the elderly, so long a matter for love, is now routinely done for money throughout the “developed” world. Are there parents out there who are proud to have cared for their(sic.) children “professionally”, i.e. by working hard enough to house them permanently at a paid professional... ? Let us hope not, but what can we expect of the next generation, who have been taught by example that it is more important to spend time with ones employer than one's offspring.

The changing meaning of the word *professional* first came to my attention in the early 1990's with the release of Microsoft Office Professional. It seemed at the time a rather feeble name, and inspired quips such as “What is the other one then, Office Amateur? Who runs an office for the love of it?” However, it was clearly an incisive choice, since within only a few years, *professional* had become a standard laudatory adjective implying superiority to the ordinary (home) version of software. The implication is clear:- if you want the best, get the professional version.



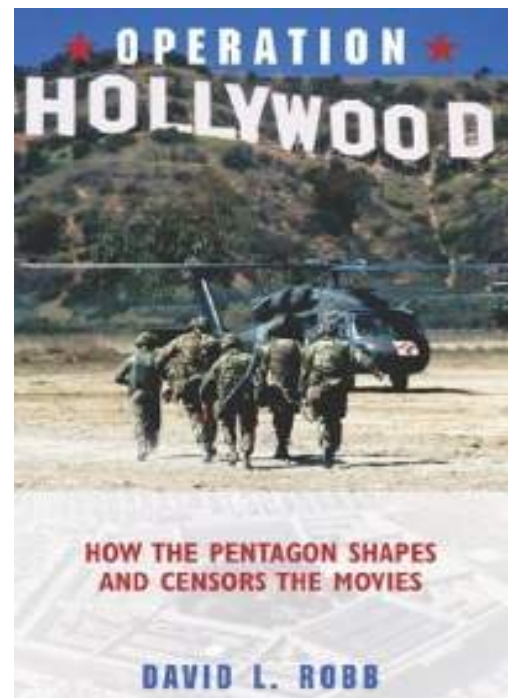
The word *security* has been undergoing a related change. When I was young, this was provided by a local community of family and friends, by relationships with others, a feeling of belonging and being wanted. The main meaning was associated with the nurturing parent model. Cuba's exceptional foreign policy of exporting trained doctors creates this kind of security, both for the recipient countries and for Cuba. The strict father model, however, is still being promoted by politicians throughout most of the world. Thomas Barnett is a Professor in the Warfare Analysis & Research Department, in the Center for Naval Warfare Studies, Newport, Rhode Island. His book, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century* presents a new grand strategy for US foreign policy which is so much to the liking of the US Air Force that they requested he give a presentation on it to every new officer who attained the rank of General.

Professor Barnett argues that the way to reduce violent conflict is to have a system of rules that are imposed on the world by overwhelming force, i.e. by US military. He suggests that the US

military should stop thinking of conflict in the context of war but war in the context of "everything else", i.e. demographics, energy, investment, security, politics, trade, immigration, etc. It needs two roles as "system administrator" (policy setter) and "Leviathan" (policy enforcer). This corresponds closely to Lakoff's strict father morality – the US knows right from wrong, and has a moral duty to punish any failed states severely enough that they are forced to toe the line. Barnett's official endorsement indicates that this system of values is popular with the US powers that be.

Professor Barnett describes the activities of the US Pentagon as "the business of exporting security", fitting it squarely into the competitive frame of the enterprising and tough getting rich off the suffering of the weak and incompetent. If it's a dog-eat-dog world, there's no shame in being top dog, right? In less image conscious times the "security business" would have been referred to as part arms dealing, part protection racketeering. In 2009, the US spends about as much on weapons as all the other countries of the world combined, making it – in the meaning of "security industry" (strict father model) – the world's most secure country, as well as – in the meaning of "emotional security" (nurturing parent model) – also the world's most insecure country. While arms exports remains one of the vital (sic.) sectors of the US economy, its cultural output, proves to be at least as toxic. David Robb's book, *Operation Hollywood*, details how the Pentagon has worked together with Hollywood for over half a century to control depictions of warfare, focussing particularly on films attractive to the young male audience, to ensure a fresh supply of new blood. Its recent collaborations, just as easily exported to the rest of the world, include advising software companies on the development of first person shooter games.

Those seeking to understand the rise and rise of aggression in US society need look no further than the state-backed pyramid scheme which is modern money. The more traditional, community oriented value systems are replaced by aggressively promoted programs of professionalisation and privatisation, the more reaches of life are exposed to the ruthless logic of the market system and the insidious poison of competition. Security, to many people, is no longer something which derives naturally from a matrix of healthy and loving relationships with others. Security professionals would have you believe that it is only achievable through domination of others, by spending more money on security hardware (i.e. weapons). Israel, the only country in the world to spend more on weapons per capita than US, has a thriving security industry which profits with every high profile act of terrorism. They have been experiencing a boom like no other since the events of September 11th, 2001, after which budgets for "national security" were increased all round.



The US military has an undeniably professional approach to its business of exporting of security. Outsourced to private contractors beyond all precedent, it now employs more mercenaries from other countries in Iraq than Americans. Often less 'aggressively-priced' than permanent employees, they are nevertheless more convenient, since they operated for some years outside official regulation, so helped optimise the key statistic of dead Americans that get reported back to head office. However, the Pentagon is no exemplar of financial accountability. By the secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld's own admission, the Pentagon could not account for over \$2 Trillion dollars (that's 25% of all the money it's ever received). You don't recall that announcement? It used to be at <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/2001/s20010910-secdef.html>, but has since been withdrawn. Inspection of that link will reveal the date of that announcement – September 10th, 2001. Now there's a date to ponder. Why present such bad news on a Monday? Like the \$1 Trillion dollars worth of mineral deposits apparently just discovered by the Pentagon on Afghanistan soil, maybe just coincidence, or perhaps a trick of the trade known only to the most consummate professionals?