

Is the Customer Always Right?

Last week a political magazine asked me to comment on an angry man's [Facebook](#) comments that a certain prisoner had been released from prison on appeal. They were as follows:

I'd go inside [prison] just to wrap a quilt round his neck and stab the ... in his skull until his head is drained, no remorse, no mercy, dead! His cell would be covered in red.

The question is whether such thoughts entered people's heads before the days when it was easy to communicate them, or whether ease of communication called them forth in the first place; and whether, if they were thought, they were ever communicated in public. I take it that everyone has thoughts that he thinks should be kept to himself, but inhibitions on expressing them seem to be declining. The pleasures of public expression combined with the maintenance of anonymity are not necessarily conducive to the best of taste.

I have occasionally thought about this matter, without resolving it, ever since the police came to me with the most shocking videos I have ever seen. An ordinary couple in an ordinary provincial town had set up a sexual torture chamber in their perfectly ordinary house, and there proceeded to rape their own children, day after day and week after week. I will not describe the scene fully; suffice it to say that the father filmed while the mother beat and raped the children who were suspended by their ankles from the ceiling.

The mother, at least, appeared to enjoy it enormously (you couldn't see the father because it was he who held the camera). Their main motive, however, was not enjoyment but profit; the couple sold the videos down the internet to customers for a great deal of money. They were caught because

these were the comparatively early days of the internet, and their phone bills were enormous as they sent their files all around the world. The police were sickened by what they found when the telephone company asked them to investigate.

The police brought the videos to me – 17 full-length tapes, though luckily I needed to watch at most only a few minutes of one of them – because the first defense mounted by the woman, corroborated by her husband, was that he gave her morphine injections to turn her into an automaton utterly obedient to his will and orders. This defense was utterly preposterous, and after my report no more was heard of it.

The two of them were found [guilty](#) – there could hardly have been any other verdict – but they received what to me were startlingly different sentences: he several life terms, she only 10 years. It seemed to me that even if she were less guilty than he for some reason of which I knew nothing (I did not attend the trial), she was guilty enough to merit a life sentence. Perhaps the judge had a residual disinclination to believe that a mother could really have acted as she did of her own [free will](#).

Again, though, the question is whether anyone would have behaved like this before the age of the internet. Of course there was Bluebeard's Castle and we all know that Victorian cities pullulated with child prostitutes (or [sex](#) workers, as I suppose we must now call them retrospectively). But still one feels that there is something different about this case, and that, because the [appetite](#) grows with the feeding, the market for this kind of horror does not so much arise as is deliberately created and fostered.

The question of whether supply creates demand or demand creates supply is an important one, not only because it is interesting in itself but because it has enormous political consequences. Is the demand for sugary things spontaneous or created, for example? In France I have noticed that even the

potatoes are now noticeably sweeter than they were not long ago, and presumably have been deliberately modified to make them so; it is impossible to buy white grapefruit because they are not as sweet as pink. Public taste has shifted, but not spontaneously.

The relationship between supply and demand is no doubt dialectical. A created demand (for something which must have at least an initial appeal to pre-existing or potential human tastes) will eventually become spontaneous: which will not by itself make it right or good, of course.

Where the boundaries should be set between freedom and control is always contentious. Even in the monstrous case outlined above, there is the question as to why the police intervened in the first place (it is just as well that they did). Do people not have the right to use their phone line as much as they like without being suspected and investigated? How many true suspicions does it take to justify acting on a given number of false suspicions?

The only answer I can think of is a feeble one: it depends.

First published in