

An Autoethnographic Account of the Free Market: My Father

by Michael Rectenwald



Instead of approaching the free market abstractly, in this short series, I'll approach it from the standpoint of my own experience. In short, I'll treat the free market in an autoethnographic account. Autoethnography is just what the word suggests: it is a genre of ethnographic writing and research that connects the personal to the cultural, placing the self within a social, historical context. For the Marxists who may by chance read this essay, one might think of it in terms of what the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci referred to as a means to knowing oneself as a product of history¹—although I do not subscribe to the belief that we are merely historical products.

As we approach Mother's Day, ironically, I want to trace some of my memories of my father. My mother is living, at ninety-six years old. She would not mind my writing about my father for Mother's Day. In fact, if she were fully cognizant, which she is not, I am certain that she would very much approve and appreciate it.² It's my way of honoring my father and mother.

Both of my parents were Great Depression babies. What I know of the Great Depression I learned mostly from my parents' stories from the period. I have not studied the Great Depression in any academic sense. I know from my parents that the Great Depression was a time of desperation. But I also know that it was a time of great industriousness, at least in their cases.

While my father probably never knew the causes for the Great Depression, he seemed to grasp intuitively that the free market was not its cause, despite the prevailing claims to the contrary. Far from it. He apparently grasped that the free market was the way out. I will not rehearse here, partly because I am not qualified to do so, but more so because it's not the approach I want to take, the various failures of the Federal Reserve and state interventionism that brought about and lengthened the Great Depression. Instead, I will trace my father's emergence from the Great Depression and how his faith in the free market was maintained and fortified.

My father told me several times about how during the Depression his father made homemade noodles and how my father sold them door to door. I also know that from an early age, around twelve or thirteen, my father began helping his father to remodel homes. The picture I get is of my father beginning to take on a fatherly role from a very early age, especially given that his father was an alcoholic. Imagine going through the Great Depression as an alcoholic, or the child of an alcoholic. My grandfather's need to drink must have crowded out other pressing needs. My father told me of times when, installing a new roof on a house, my drunken grandfather went

rolling off the roof onto the ground. My father took it upon himself to support his family—his mother, father, and siblings.

My father lost all of his hair from rheumatism. From an early age, he was completely bald. Thus, with no hair, a drunken father, and going through the Great Depression, he was left to his own resources to survive and support others.

Then, as I understand it, my father was drafted into the military and became a paratrooper. My father never faced any combat action in the war. He broke his legs during a paratrooping exercise. Somehow, he managed to attend college, at Auburn University. But this did not last long, as duty called. He married my mother and began raising a family. Making a family was not an arbitrary choice as such. It was apparently a pressing need that my parents both felt. Both of my mother's parents were also alcoholics. My parents needed to create the family that they never had. What is clear is that the family was an essential structure for social and economic survival.

My father was a home remodeler and my mother would later drive a school bus. Soon, they had nine children. They managed to emerge from the Great Depression to yield a large, stable family, with relative upward mobility.

Until I was four years old, we lived in the country—in a spartan ranch house that my father had built. When I say he built the house, I mean that he actually built the house himself, not that he hired a contractor to build it. On this same spacious country property, my grandparents lived in a house, which my father also built, that sat deeper in the woods. The houses were situated at the end of a mile-long dirt road embedded with cobblestones called Panno Drive. With heavy rain or snow, Panno Drive was sometimes impassable. The setting was rustic and the living, I have been told, was rough. Yet there was a bounty of cats, dogs, goats, and bees,

and a large, relatively level field where we later played baseball and football. I remember the living room, where we watched television, and that I used to imitate Louie Armstrong, singing "[Hello Dolly](#)," replete with taking a handkerchief to the face, to the great amusement of my parents and siblings.

When I was four, we moved into a more spacious and impressive brick house in the city on Waldorf Street in Pittsburgh's Upper Northside. Waldorf Street had earlier been named "Banker's Row." A few of the houses on that street were quite grand. Ours was not grand, but further along the street there were veritable mansions.

My father did not sell the property in the country. Instead, he rented out our house to my oldest sister and her husband, and my grandparents remained in their house nestled in the woods. This made trips to the country both experiences of reminiscence and also of great refreshment. We lived in the city but retained our connection to the country. Trips to my grandmother's house had that quintessential feeling. It really was "over the river and through the hills to grandmother's house we go." My grandmother on my father's side was a gentle Scottish woman who bore my grandfather's alcoholism with great patience and restraint. She let him believe he was always right. My grandfather was a cantankerous old cadger with terminally bloodshot eyes and rapidly vacillating moods. He would scorn you and smile at you, seemingly within seconds of one another.

On Waldorf Street, we had a fairly large front yard and a backyard separated into two by a garage, which my father used for storage of tools and materials. The backyard backed up into a wooded area where we used to play, building tree shacks and other fortresses. There was a hill where we used to dump refuse that my father had excavated from houses that he gutted. We threw old sinks, discarded ceramic tile, plaster, and anything else that came out of the houses he remodeled. No

one complained, because it was our property. We covered over the trash with brush and mowed grass. You might say that we remained hicks who'd moved to the city, sort of like the Clampetts in [*The Beverly Hillbillies*](#).

Speaking of television, my father was a great lover of it. In hindsight, I realize that he saw such developments as radio and television as great enhancements and sources of enjoyment. I remember when cable television was new and the cable TV salesman came to our house. My father greeted him enthusiastically. It was further proof to him that things kept improving. He would scoff at the criticisms that I began to throw at him in my early teens, criticisms drawn partly from my older brother's abandoned books, like [*The Mind Managers*](#), by Herbert I. Schiller, and partly drawn from the air, that television was a means to brainwash the public. But the media didn't brainwash my father; it merely entertained him when he wasn't working.

I will not place my family background within the overall context of capitalism, except to say that as we enjoyed the benefits of a decent economy and my parents' industriousness, a corrosive ideology was always operative. For lack of a better term, this ideology was socialist. It emanated from cultural institutions and found expression in popular culture and the social realm.

For example, I was a tennis player and became a tennis coach during the summer after my first year in college. I remember the league manual that we coaches were given as guidance for how to run our teams. We were instructed not to worry about winning. Although we would keep score, we should not emphasize the score but rather encourage the experience of tennis for its own sake.

It came through the television, in such sitcoms as *Gilligan's Island*, the 1960s collectivist Robinson Crusoe saga about the communal living of shipwrecks on a deserted island, in which

the division of labor and the desire to accrue wealth were figured as antisocial and ridiculous.

It came through propagandistic films, like the one my father and I watched (on cable TV) one Saturday, the movie [*O Lucky Man!*](#)—a rather desultory montage featuring Malcolm McDowell. My father recognized instantly that the film was a critique of capitalism and said that it represented an exaggeration to that effect.

Of course, it came in the protests of the Vietnam War, which played in our living room and in which American aggression came to be conflated with capitalism itself.

And it came in denunciations of consumerism, brought home by my once wayward older brother. Consumption, we were now told, was as pernicious as poverty, if not more so, to the interests of “working-class” people, like ourselves. My father’s response to all this was consternation. How could his rising standard of living have been bad thing after all? He would have nothing of it.

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