

Children at Checkout



by Theodore Dalrymple

It is a trope of many intellectuals that to stack shelves in a supermarket, or to work at a supermarket checkout, is the worst fate that can befall a human being. Such a job is regarded as the very epitome of dead-endedness, though a dead end is what we are all progressing toward anyway, and many people do not particularly want excitement on the way to that inevitable dead end. They want peace and tranquility instead: As some of my patients used to ask, “Can’t you give me something to stop me thinking, doctor?” It was not any particular thoughts that they wanted to cease to think: It was thought as such.

Be that as it may, there is interest to be found in supermarkets, for example in people’s choice of comestibles. I often look at what people buy and am appalled. It is almost as

if they trusted nothing that had not been processed in a hundred factories and added to by a thousand chemicals. What they eat is natural only in the sense that everything that exists is natural. The products they choose may be given names suggestive of pastures, meadows, flowers, mountain ranges, and so forth, but the list of contents in microscopic letters on the back reads like an advanced textbook of chemistry, organic and inorganic. But at least all the purchasers have to do to prepare the stuff is to heat it up, which is about as far as their culinary skills extend.

You can tell the social class of people by simply looking at what they buy. Partly, of course, it is a question of money, but only partly. The higher the proportion of fresh food chosen, the higher the social class. As for alcoholics, they buy edibles as if eating were a regrettable necessity and rather a waste of money. They buy as little and as cheaply as possible: They do not want to eat into their drinking money. It is as if they knew dietary recommendations perfectly and had decided to do as near the opposite as they could. Dostoyevsky said that if a perfectly benevolent and well-intentioned government existed (a wildly unlikely hypothesis), people would do the opposite of its injunctions merely to exercise their freedom. Fortunately, no such government is necessary to prove the determination of people not to follow good advice—which, as La Rochefoucauld pointed out, is in any case easier to give than to take.

If I were to work at a supermarket checkout—another kind of employment that will soon disappear—I am sure that I should find it very difficult to refrain from commentary on the customers' purchases. "How can you buy this disgusting rubbish?" I would ask. "It isn't even cheap, contrary to what you suppose."

Nowadays, people are prepared to eat cakes with sky-blue icing, or sky-blue ice cream. Fifty-five years ago, I held a dinner party at which I dyed potatoes either red or blue, my

hypothesis being that my guests would be prepared to eat the red potatoes but not the blue: red being a possible color for a natural food but blue being obviously artificial. And so it turned out: People (of my own age) would eat the red but not the blue potatoes.

It would be interesting to repeat the experiment today. It might well be that people are now so disconnected from nature, and so accustomed to the artificial, that they would be prepared to eat blue potatoes.

From time to time, I find shopping lists either dropped or thrown onto the street in my little town in England (the English have become the most slovenly people in the world, in their disposal of litter as in their dress). I pick up these lists and read them: They are interesting both as to form—bad spelling—and content, which is to remind people what they have gone out to buy. The very idea of a shopping list, incidentally, is now distinctly old-fashioned, implying as it does some kind of self-discipline rather than action on impulse, so that one might presume that the people who make—but also discard, whether deliberately or accidentally—shopping lists are of above average self-control. Most people seem to shop, at least in supermarkets, as if they were wandering about until inspiration emanating from the shelves struck them. Few are those who enter with a fixed purpose, adhere to it, and leave once they have bought what they set out to buy.

But even shopping lists catch people *in flagrante delicto*, as it were, just before or just after they have committed crimes against nutritional good sense. Good God, I think, they give this stuff to their children, it is almost a form of child abuse. The problem is that mothers ask their children what they would like to eat tonight, and with the bad sense that is natural to children, or to humans, the children always reply that they want whatever is bad for them. And the mothers, fearing an outburst of petulance, immediately comply. Thus, an

asymmetric war is set up between mothers and children: the mothers having all the power, but the children having the whip hand.

Therefore, it was a pleasure the other day to pick up a shopping list from the ground that concerned only the person's dog. What unconditional love it bespoke!

Dog food

Treats [the above evidently not being sufficient]

Grooming products and brushes

Dog toys

Towels and blankets

Poo bags [for when the dog is taken for a walk in the town]

Puppy pads

Bone sale

As the fertility rate declines, so the number of dogs increases; and I have to admit that these days, I myself find relations with dogs rather easier than those with humans, of almost any age. My impression is that people have become more difficult of late years, more complex in an uninteresting way, possibly because of the habit, not of reflecting on themselves, but of thinking and talking about themselves. Possibly my difficulty is part of the aging process, which in this case is mine; but never, so it seems, have so many people been so incompetent in the art of living, notwithstanding all the advantages they have enjoyed in their lives.

First published in [*Taki's magazine*](#).