



owens: In [David Bosworth's](#) [essay](#), you argue that the American national character has been transformed in recent decades. Can you describe the nature of that transformation?

bosworth: Early on in this project, I found a quote by Descartes in his *Discourse on Method* that seemed very applicable to our post-World War II period. He made the observation, while trying to understand his own turbulent era, that sometimes what people think they believe is different from what they actually believe—that is, from the values encoded in their everyday actions. This discrepancy is not the same thing as simple hypocrisy, which is common in every era, or as the Judeo-Christian conception of sin. Instead, it occurs in individuals subconsciously when traditional values are shifting inside their social environment

“virtual” to describe it. Physically, the enclosed mall’s interior spaces deliberately mimic the appearance of a public park or a civic square—there are often benches and fountains and planters, for example. But it isn’t, in fact, a civic space, nor does it honor the political values we expect in one. We’re being observed all the time by security guards. All our financial transactions are being tracked. We may be filmed by paid consultants who are studying how products should be displayed to boost sales. In most states, we are not even guaranteed free speech. We can’t campaign or picket or even wear a t-shirt that bears a political statement.

owens: What is the value system manifested in this transformation? You nicely described the experiential shift and the rise of pseudo-civic space, but what are the attendant value shifts that have come as a result?

bosworth: In “virtual America,” nearly all activities are being torqued to serve “the bottom line,” whether corporate or personal. All values are assessed by the measures of money. But in practice, there are two separate commercial environments to consider—marketing and management, our behavior at play and our behavior at work—and those domains enforce distinctly different codes of conduct: the first narrowly focused on boosting consumption and the second on enhancing productivity.

In the privatized space of the enclosed mall—where there are no clocks, no windows, and there are gorgeous product displays in every direction—the emphasis is on salesmanship. Everything is carefully directed toward boosting desire to induce consumption. And given the economic model that we have selected for our mass communications systems, the same can be said for those virtual spaces conveyed to us by our electronic and digital media: they are also being “brought to us by” and so also “for” the ethos of consumption.

At work, however, the ethical emphasis, though equally reductive, is nearly the opposite: we are not encouraged to indulge ourselves but to submit to the rationalized schemes of industrial production—to model our behavior after a machine. That such an economic agenda can dehumanize its employees, even as it succeeds in mass-producing the material goods that we believe we

bureaucrats or shareholders. There's also the B-corporation phenomenon: commercial startups freely choosing to include in their corporate charters the obligation to serve a few specified social goods as well as to seek profits. And the

degree to which the American character's investment in an optimistic view of life was being distorted and corrupted.

If you want to grasp the inherently dehumanizing impact of the strictly rationalized workplace, read "Bartleby the Scrivener," first published in 1853. If you want to understand the multiple ways that hope can be corrupted to "close the sale" on a whole range of dubious products, spend a week exploring *C. . . M . .* And if you want to confront the potential consequences of adopting a political economy that imagines that it can conquer nature, reread the calamitous ending of Melville's *M. . D. .* Like all real prophets, his is the news that has stayed news. We ignore it today at our own peril.

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The Boisi Center for
Religion and American
Public Life

Boston College
24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

tel 617-552-1860

fax 617-552-1863

publife@bc.edu

boisicenter

@boisi_center