A Nation of Supplicants

by "Annie" of OutPox

Imagine a world full of people holding out - arms extended - their best products, or their empty bowls, or their most beautiful physical performances. To whom are they extending their talents, hopes, or dreams in this way? Why? I will tell you how I see it.

The title of this essay – A Nation of Supplicants – is a word-play on "A Nation of Shopkeepers."

The United Kingdom was once called a nation of shopkeepers, because its government had been persuaded that free commerce would serve its people better than feudalism. Feudalism was the social system in which impoverished serfs worked farmland for lords, ladies, and aristocrats. (This is a simplification; this is also a very short essay.)

If we are in charge, "we do not befriend staff," because staff are employees. An employment relationship is different from a friendly relationship. Employees depend on us for what may be their livelihood, so it is not an equal relationship. Friendship is (probably) an equal relationship. If "power" to us is a dirty word, we may not explore too closely what we mean by "equal." I will leave that idea hanging, because this essay pursues different avenues below.

If we are good employers, we look out for our staff. We develop an environment in which they like to work for us, where they are protected from harm, and where the compensation is sufficient for them and their families to live pleasant lives. In some societies, there may be, for example, two main social groups – employer (or patron), and employee (or supplicant/protegee).

Today, we have multi-layered employment hierarchies. "If your business's revenue depends on MY business's revenue, then you are a supplicant, not a free agent." What we will see, if we have eyes to see, is that small businesses serve medium-sized businesses; medium-sized businesses serve large businesses; and large businesses serve governments which draw in massive tax revenues.

The usual state of affairs is that "agents" (businesses or governments) higher on the tree of financial power choose which of many supplicants will work for them. Those not selected will seek work from lesser luminaries. HOW the society works depends very much on the priorities of the decision-makers at the top of the financial (or power) tree. These are the CEOs, Vice Presidents, Kings, Queens, Presidents, Prime Ministers, Cabinets, Lords, Ladies, and Gentlemen.

If you want to pick holes in this analysis, I expect it is possible. I ask you to see what I am saying and run with it for a while, not to nitpick any particular details. If, after you have run with it for a while, then you might indeed realize that you don't find my perspective helpful in YOUR life.

The picture I have in my mind – that is a metaphor, not something you can see as such – is a cascade of money dripping down from the castle on the hill, filling every little crevice it encounters on the way down. The crevices represent the people or things that need money in order to stay well. At the top of the hill, in the castle itself, is the King or General, and staff. They have lots of money.

They can let money fall evenly around their hill, dripping into crevices (feeding people and maintaining buildings) as it encounters them. Or they can decide to direct the money, and start changing the shape of the hill. Over time, hills will adapt to the priorities of Kings or Generals, as generations come and go. For example, if one King wanted the South side of the Hill to get more water (money), then we might see walls going up, directing water (money) in that direction. Later Kings could take walls down or reinforce the pattern by moving earth around.

We can extend this analogy in several ways, to encompass societal complexities, but the main point is that, indirectly, everything "under" the King depends on money that the King allocates as he or she sees fit. Let us address the case in which recipients of money are not passive (they don't just "take" what the Hill's bounty sends cascading down).

For example, workers and building-owners realize that they can influence a King's decisions. Then, they become supplicants – "feed me; buy mine; give to me; donate this; donate that; fix this." This seems to be a good metaphor for how our modern world works – we are a Nation (or Nations) of Supplicants. Everybody offers their best wares to people above them.

I hope that those of you who are not economists have missed the main challenge with this metaphor, so that I may spring it on you now! WHERE do Kings of the Hills get the money that goes cascading downhill in the first place? Elsewhere, I have used a fountain analogy to describe the flow of money around an economic system. (Fountain, pump, pipes, basin.) In that analogy, the pump brings the water (money) back to the beginning (that is, sends it out of the top of the fountain) again. The fountain analogy suggests that money travels around a system, then repeats the same journey. The "cascade" analogy suggests a hierarchy of uses for money, that gradually changes the very environment across which it descends. But there is no mechanism to get the water back to the top of the hill! (I think we must assume a system of pumps here, as well, so that the water can keep flowing. But how do they work if the item flowing is money, not water?)

Economists say that money in hand is soon spent. IF money in hand is spent on something "above" the spender in the cascading hierarchy, then it is going back up the hill, but perhaps not going farther down the hill at that point. (Example – we donate to the Art Gallery and we drive there instead of catching a bus. We dine in the exclusive restaurant instead of the "people's bar.")

In this "cascade" analogy, money is directed – partly by living agents, and partly by the (changing) environment itself. In what little space remains, I remind you that many sub-hierarchies also have Kings of Hills; and that there are people and buildings at bottoms of hills where watery nourishment may barely reach. Too much water (money) siphoned off into wealthy crevices (pockets) at upper echelons is a problem, in my opinion; especially since Hills usually rest on the ground at the bottom. Weak foundations have been known to collapse, suddenly.