Niceness in a Neoliberal Age

Carrie Tirado Bramen begins with a reference to Trump, who often describes himself as a "nice person". Trump divides the world into nice and nasty, demonstrating how likeability and sociability are more powerful than politics. However, Trump is not the only public figure to emphasize niceness. Rather, niceness is a tool commonly utilized as a way to combat societal insecurity due to the neoliberal policies that dismantled the welfare state. Neoliberalism has led to what Bramen denotes as "soulless individualism", a result of the "corporate takeover" of social life. Margaret Thatcher, as well as George Bush and David Cameron, formulated a privatized niceness or "compassionate conservatism"; individuals should rely on each other, not the state, for support. Niceness can serve to both enable capitalism by blurring class lines, and undermine capitalism by justifying social welfare policy. Niceness, although a simple and everyday mode of sociality, functions paradoxically.

We often see niceness in the corporate world. Values such as cooperation and collaboration have flourished as a management style in the workplace, and values of niceness are fundamental to customer service. However, especially in customer service, niceness simply masks underlying hostility and passive aggressiveness. In this way, niceness can function as a tool for totalitarianism, masking the true intent of autocratic leaders by disguising their cruel intentions via affability. Even in the United States, this kind of totalitarianism has emerged in the form of inverted totalitarianism, denoted by Wolin, where democracy exists without an active citizenry participating in it. Inverted totalitarianism is marked by optimism and neoliberal niceness by which the ruling class can assure the people that everything will be okay while assuaging class conflict.

Niceness precedes neoliberalism, and in fact has worked to maintain class stratifications since their emergence in the Jacksonian era. Niceness compensates for a lack of economic equality by providing social equality; it's seen as honorable to be respectful towards service people. Niceness is a form of noblesse oblige, or a way the privileged act with generosity towards those with less privilege. Niceness can also work to enforce social equality. Bramen illustrates the contrast between Obama and Prime Minister Gordon Brown of Britain; Obama was friendly to a security officer at 10 Downing Street, shaking his hand, while the PM did not acknowledge the security guard. Furthermore, the Obamas thanked every servant for their hospitality, performing aristocracy and social equity. In this way, niceness enforces egalitarianism and noblesse oblige. Individuals in a class-stratified society counter class differences by niceness, which compensates for class inequalities while doing nothing to dismantle inequity. As Bramen remarks, "economics of access are replaced with the gestures of access". Neoliberalism has made the personal non-political and privatized, but Bramen argues that re-politicizing the personal can challenge neoliberalism by restoring politics among private individuals and connect interpersonal relationships to the larger public sphere to inspire greater societal unity.

Unlike neoliberal niceness, nonmarket niceness defines relationships and behaviors that do not exist for profit but rather for social well-being. In social movements since Trump's election, this particular form of nonmarket nicessness has been utilized to counter hate. For instance, Lady Gaga tweeted, "Stand up for kindness" and signs at the Women's March read, "Make America kind again". Nonmarket niceness is more like hope than optimism; optimism is conservative and perpetuates the status quo, whereas hope is more uncertain and allows us to imagine other socio-political structures that are not centered on neoliberalism. Pope Francis epitomizes hope with his vision of solidarity that requires face to face human connection. Jane Addams in Hull House aimed to bring the elite and immigrant into the same home in order to foster this same kind of face to face solidarity . However, this fell apart during the Pullman strike when George Pullman, the owner of the Pullman Company, refused to compromise. This failure demonstrates that niceness is sometimes not a productive strategy; it relies on persuading elites to do the right thing for the sake of niceness. In some circumstances, the only way to dismantle class hierarchy and oppressive institutions like slavery is through civil disobedience and non-niceness. In oppressive situations, niceness can be utilized to keep the oppressed in their place by deprioritizing other

values like fairness. Malcolm Gladwell argued that "niceness is the enemy of fairness" and rather than being a tool for justice as Addams believed, it can be a way to enforce inequity.

Bramen then moves on to discuss niceness in protests. She explains how the face is a site of politics because it is where niceness and hatred occur. In an English Defence League (EDL) rally, Saffiyah Khan smiled at a protester. In this way, niceness is not a tool of placation, but rather a means of confrontation. Feminine niceness is usually the epitome of femininity, as women are supposed to be the peacekeepers, but Khan defies this gender role and instead uses feminine niceness to challenge white supremacy. Khan can counter microaggressions using niceness and take up space in the public sphere.

Bramen concludes with relating nonmarket niceness to socialism by referencing Marcel Mauss's notion of a socialist revolution. Maussian socialism is based on small local movements that lead to a gradual society shift, rather than a large upheaval that dismantles existing socio-political structures. Mauss defined the social as a structure, and understood how the social can shape behavior. In this way, niceness can be seen as a social structure to be analyzed as it can be used to develop social bonds into solidarity; in this way it can lead to a long term revolution against neoliberalism. Interpersonal niceness can inspire social institutions of care and recover the societal unity that neoliberalism has attempted to eliminate.

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