

to great lengths with both overt attacks, indirect attacks by entities not identifiable as Big Pharma, and control of government and non-government agencies (Abramson, 2004; Cohen, 2001; Kauffman, 2006). DeGrandpre wrote:

The cult of pharmacology must therefore have served a different purpose than the elimination of dangerous drugs and the sanctioning of psychiatric medications . . . during the twentieth century. The competitiveness of the drug market and the fact that one or two successfully approved and marketed compounds could raise a company from rags to riches almost overnight made for an increasingly aggressive and reckless industry. The medicopharmaceutical industrial complex that . . . emerged benefited directly from differential prohibition, moreover, in that the demonization of certain natural substances—marijuana, cocaine and opiates—helped set them apart from the "ethical" pharmaceutical compounds, even if the latter had equal or greater toxicity. (p. 241).

Very highly recommended, but with the sole complaint that there was not a single graph, chart, table or photo.

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The Era of Choice: The Ability to Choose and its Transformation of Contemporary Life by Edward C. Rosenthal. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005. 336 pp. \$32.50 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-262-18248-5.

The author's thesis is that the unprecedented range of choice available to people in modern times represents a new phenomenon that we must study to understand its present and future implications. Every choice is a decision, a word with a Latin root meaning "to cut off". Every decision cuts off the many other alternatives that we face. Even if not pathological, the desire to avoid regret following a decision can lead to paralysis, emphasizing "look before you leap" rather "he who hesitates is lost".

There is no doubt that choices in the lives of all of us have expanded. In the fields of recorded music, technological changes that once took many decades now seem to occur almost monthly. Instead of a few television channels, we now have

hundreds, by broadcast, cable, or satellite. We can now own movies and soon we may not even bother.

In reading this book, I was reminded of a Soviet professor friend I knew 25 years ago. When I invited him to lunch at our faculty club, he complained, upon seeing the menu, about the extensive choices, which numbered about 20. I did not appreciate my friend's view until I visited the Soviet Union, where choice was often very limited. The question you faced in a market was not what kind of cheese you should buy but rather was there any cheese to buy. When we enter a modern supermarket, we can choose between hundreds of cheese products by kind, method of packaging, price, etc. Yet few people are paralyzed by the extent of choice in selecting cheese or among the thousands of other items available for sale. We have learned that we need not be intimidated by choice and that we can strike a balance between making familiar choices and occasional experimentation.

The reaction to choice may be related to personality types, such as those classified by Myers-Briggs indicators. Some people prefer closure over possibility by selecting an alternative, while others like to keep present possibilities open. We need a balance between those who seek better designs and those who settle on one so that a product can be produced.

This wide-ranging, well-written book explores the issue of choice in science, religion, philosophy, art, and culture. While generally even-handed, the author betrays a distaste for free markets and privatization that is an exception. He writes,

Starting with the family, if we consider any community of any size (ultimately the global community), there is a natural dichotomy of goods and services into those that we own and those that we share, that is, those that are private and those that are public. And this fact renders the price-mechanistic, free-market, laissez-faire, egoistic system unsuitable as an approach to solve all of our socioeconomic problems.

It is clear that Mr. Rosenthal has not learned much from Milton Friedman. It was once thought that both telephone and postal services must be run by government monopolies. Within the last several decades we have seen how we now have wonderful new choices in these areas by taking most of them out of government's hands. A comparison of how many stamps we buy today with how much of the content of our mailboxes we immediately discard as junk mail shows both the benefits of choice and the consequences of lack of choice. Consider why we do not receive junk mail from package delivery companies.

On the whole, the author fares better when he discusses subjects other than economics. At one point he suggests that insurance could not be provided by a free market economy, perhaps thinking that Lloyd's of London was a British government agency.

My recommendation: read this book as a useful background for your own thoughts on choice and not for the opinions of the author.

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