Carnival of Distractions

Here in America, we are ensconced in a bacchanal of media-candy. A prodigious dose of viral memes (tailored to the lowest common denominator so as to maximize market-share) dominates almost everyone's attention from dawn to (long after) dusk. We Americans are an ilk randy for whatever fleeting gratification is thrown our way; so we eagerly eat it up, basking in the splendor of our own glibness. (I say "we" because the writer of this essay is also guilty of this ubiquitous proclivity.)

Indeed, most of us can't help but clamor to slake–in whatever way is immediately available to us–our thirst for amusement. We do this no matter how vacuous the material might be, no matter how superficial our obsessions, no matter how petty our fixations. Most of us resign ourselves to vacuity because we are so eager to satiate our (chronic) hankering for enticing spectacle. Alas, we tend not to covet any mode of edification not suited explicitly to advancing in our narrow vocation. For we are eminently pragmatic creatures, exclusively preoccupied with the concerns du jour.

The daily pageant of persiflage is a booming business: supply meets demand… which, in turn, fuels that demand. It is a vicious cycle. Day in and day out, our senses are accosted by candy-coated dreck–an incessant bombardment of mindless titillation designed for maximum appeal yet minimal edification. Our sensibilities are acclimated accordingly. On TV and on the web, we are engulfed in a perpetual spume of delicious garbage. He have become habituated to this all-encompassing Carnival Of Distractions–and thus inured to our own intellectual impoverishment. Consequently, we are a nation of thoroughly-amused idiots.

SPRING OF 2011: The Beginning Of A Jeremiad

"Prince William and Kate Middleton are getting married!"

This single ejaculation of excitement captures the mode of diversion that characterizes American pop culture. It is also an encapsulation of the degree to which our public discourse has degenerated.The relationship between these two conditions is not often made, which is itself a problem.There is an integral

connection between our socially-conditioned penchants and the modus operandi of our political interlocution: as the former becomes dysfunctional, the latter degenerates.

Of the epidemic fascination with the British royal wedding, the question immediately arises: Why would anyone pay attention to such an event?There are numerous explanations.In terms of psychology: Those with empty lives yearn to live vicariously through fairy-tale-like occurrences.But there is a wider, sociological explanation for this peculiar occupation.Think about it: Here is an event that—logistically—need not concern anybody on the planet outside of a circle of friends and family members… yet it is touted as if it were of the most dire importance to every person in the West.

Recently, our economy was crashed by corporate impresarios who continue to operate with impunity…yet we're entirely focused on what Kate Middleton was wearing yesterday afternoon.

One need only look at the latest issue of US Weekly, Starz, In Touch, The New York Post / Daily News, or some other tabloid to see how severely distracted most Americans have become.With gossip-mag in hand, i-pod jacked in, and Facebook page thoroughly updated, we carry on with the usual vapid routine—perfectly content that the world will work itself out.In the meantime, another trillion dollars of tax-payer money is pointlessly siphoned into the military-industrial complex.But no matter—so long as we see the latest photos of Justin Bieber's hair-cut, or a U.S. Congressman's tawdry Twitter pics, our world remains solid.

A cursory survey is all that is required to see that most Americans are constantly preoccupied with the inane and the petty.How snazzy are our suits?Who is our wedding planner?Do I have the trendiest handbag? Am I wearing my pants the "right" way?Most of us are content to relentlessly fixate on the superficial—as if somehow the sine qua non of life were the brand of attire one wears. Salacious scandals are especially enticing, as they captivate us en masse…keeping us distracted…preventing us from engaging in anything that remotely resembles critical reflection…thereby rendering deliberative democracy untenable. After all, our fascination with the prurient excapades of public figures is so much more titillating than, say, a rigorous analysis of economic policy.

We'd much rather spend our time "getting the dirt on" each political candidate than embark on a meticulous evaluation of the consequences of his proposals. None of us is innocent. We Americans are a peculiar bunch.

Even as our beleagured democracy struggles to contend with grave dysfunction, we tend to concern ourselves with frivolous things on a daily basis.Instead of attending to our civic duty to participate in governance, we focus our attention elsewhere. We thus forgoe straight-forward measures that would rectify our nation's problems.

Whether one's favorite sports team wins the next game may be the primary focus today, while a cavalcade of insipid curiosities may consume us tomorrow: what will happen next on that Reality TV show…and what will I wear to the lounge this evening?We routinely fuss over fatuous matters because that is what we've been relentlessly conditioned to do. We are all culpable, in one way or another, in our own insipid ways.

Here in New York, the socialites find the need to stay informed about the next trendy social venue in between bouts of banal banter with annointed peers.Many devote their time finding ways to be "seen" with the "right" kinds of people—taking great care to ensure the style of attire they've selected is acceptable according to the last cover of Glamour magazine.Meanwhile, they remain oblivious to objectively important matters—and have allowed the common-weal to deteriorate accordingly.

One need only watch a morning talk-show, an hour of CNBC, ten minutes of "Reality TV", or the local evening news to witness the degree to which we are incessantly inundated with irrelevant information.We are infatuated with spectacle. And so, per the laws of supply and demand, spectacle is precisely what we're given:car crashes in the next county and murders across town, adultery down the street and fashion in our own closet. Every day we concern ourselves with the things that will never contribute to our edification.

We Americans are preoccupied with getting "the next juicy scoop" because we've been programmed to be that way by an omni-present culture industry. The industry feeds ravenously on our choreographed sensibilities.We consume what is offered even as we're consumed by it.Another year goes by, and we wonder why so much dysfunction plagues the nation.Yes, our economy is in shambles, but at least we're dressed fashionably!

ANALYSIS OF THE CARNIVAL:

In order to pander to our adolescent tastes, "personal interest" stories dominate the airwaves—covering who's wearing what and who's sleeping with who…the recipe for another tasty dish and some magical gimmicks for "getting in shape"…secrets to happiness and handy dating tips…and, of course, a new way to apply cosmetics and

do your hair.Only by taking a step back may we recognize that many of our daily priorities are governed by petty concerns.We rarely ask, “But WHY do I care so much about this?”Shall we ever take pause, step back, and ask ourselves of our latest fixation: “In the grand scheme of things, does this really matter?”

We’re familiar with the salacious love-life of each movie star, yet seem not to have the faintest clue that the “trickle-down” effects we’re promised are a fable.And so we remain fully-apprised of each celebrity deliance even as we obliviously endorse economic policies that foster a plutocracy while screwing the rest of us over.

Reading People magazine doesn’t help us understand why a nation’s healthcare system should be a universal public service—but browsing the celebrity photos sure does quench our thirst for being “in-the-know”.(After all, what else are we supposed to discuss with our friends over cocktails after work?)Today, the paparazzi serves a more vital function than any renown sociologist.The “catch” to this Carnival of Distractions: Our pre-occupation with petty matters may well be our downfall.

Tens of millions have succumbed to mental lethargy, and are thus chronically obsessed with tabloid fodder, professional sports, the latest development on each popular television program, and the on-going bloviations of the anointed political pundit.The Salafists are wrong about almost everything they say; but they are right about one thing: America is a place of decadence and materialism…and has lost its way.(That they notice this while we do not is rather embarrassing—as these are the same people who think the afterlife is a five-star luxury resort replete with a harem of 72 virgins.)

The prognosis is disconcerting: Most Americans concern themselves with what’s going on in a celebrity’s personal life or in a gay man’s bedroom instead of attending to the issues that actually matter to ALL of us.We Americans love gossip and scandal…and covet gratuitous opulence in our daily flights of fancy.We love expensive cars and big houses and trendy handbags and glamorous events.And, most of all, we love ourselves.It should come as no surprise, then, that we’re afflicted by an epidemic obliviousness while remaining blissfully immersed in our quotidian diversions.

A SURVEY OF OUR DISTRACTIONS:

It’s rather odd: Many Americans want to force any woman who accidentally becomes pregnant to be a parent—while neglecting fellow humans who are destitute.Fixating on the “life” of a zygote trumps our concern for the well-being of the impoverished

family in the poor neighborhood across town. Such contorted logic seems to make perfect sense when one learns everything one needs to know from gossip magazines.

We insist on having a semi-automatic gun in our closets—without connecting other people's disenfranchisement to OUR insecurity.We're scared of government bureaucrats…yet are unconcerned with the egregious abuses of corporate power that undermine civil society.We worry about our own vanity even as we refuse to concern ourselves with the health and education of the kids down the street. (They're not ours; why should we care?) We don't know anything about other cultures; but we can apply the make-up from Sephora very, very well.

We're staggeringly unaware of what Karl Marx actually wrote, but we're quite familiar with the personal life of latest Reality TV star.We don't read Noam Chomsky, but we can't get enough of the photos in People magazine.We're unperturbed when someone cheats in a presidential election, but would be outraged if there was ever voting fraud on American Idol.A president can't lie about getting a blow job, but he can lie about fictional threats in order to wage pointless, trillion-dollar wars.We want to know where each politician put his penis last night even as we remain oblivious to the collusion between corporate power and Capitol Hill.

When hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians are killed in foreign lands (as a result of dubiously-motivated U.S. military interventions), it's perfectly acceptable.It's only when 3,000 innocent Americans are killed that we denounce the iniquity of militarism.The hypocrisy goes un-noticed, as we're too busy watching Youtube videos of dancing cats.

What ARE most Americans are concerned on most days? Not the grievances of people in foreign lands…and the potential fall-out from ill-conceived U.S. foreign policy.Says the American: "I may be ignorant about the causes of blowback, but at least I'm wearing a trendy outfit." Social media may help us communicate more efficiently, but it doesn't help us discern WHAT we should be talking about.

For many of our woes, we have no one to blame but ourselves.Shame on us for not being more responsible.Alas, our priorities are so colossally skewed that our daily concerns seem perfectly reasonable.Our myopia doesn't see itself as myopic, because we have no inclination to see beyond this weekend's shopping list.When

one’s biggest worry in life is which bathing suit to wear this weekend, perhaps we’re not focused on the most crucial matters affecting human society.“Will it really matter five years from now?” is rarely a question we pose to ourselves.

Tens of millions of Americans are fixated on interior decorating, having a nicer car, staying updated with the week’s celebrity gossip, and following the latest tabloid scandal—so that is precisely what the commercial media feeds us each day.Consequently, tens of millions are disastrously un-informed.We only have so much time in our day to allocate; and to not allocate it judiciously is to forfeit our opportunity to make ourselves better people—and the world a better place.Yet when one’s world seems hunky dory the moment one purchases a new pair of shoes, the avoidable suffering of humans over the horizon is rendered inconsequential.

A RE-ASSESSMENT OF PRIORITIES:

Who won the Red Sox / Yankees game?How insular should my social clique be?What clothing is in fashion this season?How can I get a louder car alarm?Have you seen all the Harry Potter movies yet?Are you going to watch the next episode of Survivor tonight?What’s going to happen next?Do I have enough jewelry?That such inane things occupy the minds of so many people indicates the severity of America’s epidemic dysfunction.It is no wonder our public discourse has degenerated so egregiously.“Corporate socialism?What’s that?Like my new sunglasses?”

A question all of us should ask: Cui bono from this sad state of affairs?Looking closely, beneath the surface, we might see that such alluring theatrics are encouraged by those who benefit most from the on-going orgy of diversions.The beneficiaries of this orgy, we come to find, are not the rank and file.Those who stand to gain from the Carnival of Distractions are–to be concise–those in power. That is to say, those positioned to benefit from an oblivious rabble are those who encourage an on-going circus of diversions. The logic, here, is relatively straight-forward.

The impresarios of this mesmerizing American charade—it turns out—have an entrenched vested interest in maintaining a chronically-distracted demos.But why? Such distractions prevent the citizenry from noticing how they are being played for fools…even as they thank god for their new flat-screen TV. So long as people spend their time wondering who will win on American Idol, they will spend that much less time engaging in a critical analysis of the economic policies foisted upon them. Every minute keeping up with the Kardashians is one less minute used to understand demand-side economics.

When meeting someone at a social event, many of us are more concerned with the style of their shoes than the quality of their mind.Why is this?Is it because a person's shoes matter more than a person's character?Or is it because such fatuous diversions now define how we allot esteem?We're not intentionally insipid; it's just our default mental state.Why bother engaging in a serious discussion about whether the general welfare includes provision of universal public healthcare when we can talk about a new pair of SHOES?

Our political discourse illustrates our severely skewed priorities. When voting for a political candidate, we're more concerned with their party loyalty than their probity.Their personality matters more than their wisdom. The gloss of their image is more of a factor in their success than the merit of their policies. We assess them according to how well they adhere to the party's catechism. Even following church doctrine trumps heeding the salient messages of Jesus of Nazareth.But why is all this? The Carnival of Distractions has taught us to pay attention to packaging, to presentation, above all other things. We conduct ourselves as consumers in the marketplace, whether we're shopping for ideas or for soda.

Our beleaguered democracy is the result of this defective way of thinking…yet we're too occupied with feeding our vanity to notice the flaws in this prevailing modus operandi. We're conditioned to indulge in bouts of self-importance on Facebook, yet rarely take the time to understand people who won't be useful to us. We value others according to our own social networking purposes. And that's all there is to it.

Attending to daily self-gratifications are so much more fun than learning about, say, corporate "externalities" and the massive systems of exploitation behind the marvelous "free market" façade.Neighborhood effects?What are those?Why should I care?What does that have to do with my Facebook page? Structural inequalities? Never heard of them. It's not featured in People magazine or on the local news, so what's the point? (Imagine if Cosmo magazine did a piece on Keynesian economics next month…instead of 11 New Ways To Figure Out If He's Cheating.)

The cavalcade of diversions is sometimes overwhelming.It is no wonder that civic-mindedness has dissolved—displaced by a ubiquitous hyper-consumerism (and the rampant narcissism attendant thereto).We are quick to praise stultifyingly unworthy things…and are content to glorify dubiously-acquired power.We revere every corporate titan, yet can't name a single human rights activist.We know how to make a good living, but not how to make a good life.

Alas, how are we supposed to be concerned with corporate socialism when we're too busy tuning into Regis & Kelly?When's the last time THEY talked about the military-industrial complex?Being party to idle banter seems so much more enticing than learning about the dangers of highly concentrated private wealth.IM-ing my friend is far easier than engaging in a meticulous critical analysis of corporatism.Why take the time and effort to learn elementary sociology when Desperate Housewives is on? I have a Facebook profile to update…then a hair appointment at the salon…then I have to select new curtains for the foyer.Mauve or lavender?Social justice, you say? All I know is that Progressives are socialists, and that socialism—whatever it is—is something that is evil…according to some guy I saw on TV last night.

A NEW WAY TO THINK ABOUT THINGS:

All of this can be overwhelming sometimes. Even as I am occasionally enthralled by this mesmerizing carnival, I find myself posing a few questions: How are we Americans supposed to develop an understanding of fundamental macro-economic principles–and the consequences of one policy vs. another–when we're too busy shopping for consumer products that we don't really need?I look around, and see that many of us possess the latest chic amenity, yet have only a tenuous grasp of world affairs. We're apprised of the prurient escapades of each public official–yet startlingly oblivious to…other things.

Welcome to America: too many smart phones, not enough smart people.It's a place, we find, where banal chit-chat with a friend on Skype is so much more convenient than reading the works of world-renown scholars.Why bother exerting so much mental effort when there's a betrothal to follow in Britain?

As I write this essay, tens of millions of people are occupied by such utterly pointless things as the royal wedding between Prince William and his lady-friend.Why is this? These are things that, in a well-educated society, no self-respecting person would care about.Ever.At all. So one can't help but wonder: If as many people paid attention to the insights made available by scholars as are now paying attention to celebrity gossip, would the world be a different place?How would it be different? Would more people be happy?Would there be less suffering in the world?

If most of us paid attention to important matters, there would certainly be more humanism and less haut couture.

The royal wedding in Britain will come and go, and we will not be better people for having remained abreast of its specious details.Yet so many of us insist on talking about it over and over and over. We seem not to know what else to do with ourselves.Behold: Two people with unearned privilege, in Britain, who've never done anything impressive with their lives (or for the world), are getting married.In the spring of 2011, this titillating phenomenon is front-page news…day after day after day.That such an event even registers on our radar is immensely disturbing to those of us who spend our time caring about things that…well…that actually matter.

How does our military garrison presence throughout the Middle East (and lack of support for basic Palestinian rights) affect our safety…or the price of gas at the pump?Few people are aware of such crucial matters, but have been thoroughly apprised of Kate Middleton's fashion choices. Is there a connection? There doesn't SEEM to be. What in heaven's name does one have to do with the other?

We only have so much time and attention to allocate. Insofar as we focus on one thing, we neglect the other. There is ALWAYS a connection.

So we all know what Kate Middleton is wearing. Tens of millions of people who don't know what "fiscal multiplier" or "structural inequality" mean are scrutinizing every superfluous detail of this wedding as if it had cosmic importance.That the same people can't find Saudi Arabia on a map or name the nine Supreme Court justices is not seen as a point of concern.Such ignorance poses no problem when Kate Middleton's selection of a dress is the primary issue of the day.

Indeed, each fashion update is more important than crimes against humanity that are systematically perpetrated by the settler movement in Palestine…a reprehensible project that is pissing off a billion Muslims year after year, creating seething resentment across the globe. No matter: so long as Kate selected the appropriate color for her ensemble, we will be able to get to sleep tonight. (Do those earings go with her shoes? Should I buy the same accessories she's wearing in that photo? And who's invited to the wedding reception, anyway?)

What we treat as matters of pressing concern says alot about us as a culture: What do we "give a shit" about? What do we treat as daily matters of utmost urgency? What are our day-to-day priorities…and are they consumate with being a responsible citizen in a participatory democracy?

A month after this patently irrelevant royal wedding, it was revealed that Representative Anthony Weiner of New York had sent a series of salacious messages and tawdry photos to sundry female dalliances…and EVERYONE seemed to care.Meanwhile…the month of June, 2011 also marked the ten-year anniversary of the disastrous Bush tax-cuts for the super-rich…which have had nothing but deleterious effects on the U.S. economy.Which issue was everyone talking about in the MSM?Take a guess.

In a sane world, which topic would have been deemed by the general audience to be of greater importance: failed economic policy or a congressman's lascivious proclivities? One of these two items is, indeed, of utmost relevance to the health of our society. Yet millions can't seem to figure out which is which.

Why not? Scandal sells, not edification.So a congressman's personal affairs took center stage. Again: the more salacious the better! What does Anthony's penchant for prurience have to do with the merit of his policy proposals? Absolutely nothing. But–what the heck–let's pretend that it matters anyway. It makes for better gossip.

In response to any mention of such an irrelevant issue, the responsible citizen would say, "WHO CARES?" then promptly move on to something that actually matters.That Weiner's private activities were the primary focus of the news that week…and the next week…and the next week…is tremendously disconcerting.It is no wonder that so many people are appallingly ignorant when it comes to the most important matters of the day.Imagine a fireman fussing over his haircut as the house before him continues to burn down.What Americans choose to focus on reveals much about the dysfunction in our culture.

(When Weiner resigned over the fuss over his private exchanges, I was ashamed to be an American.Not because of what Weiner did in his personal life—which was none of my concern—but because so many people cared.As with the fraudulent election of 2000 and the Lewinski "scandal" of '98, I was embarrassed for my country.What have we become?)

We should be ashamed for pillorying public officials for private matters of no consequence to the public interest…while championing despicable men for serving dubious interests in order to promote their own careers.Which sort of "malfeasance" is antithetical to the public good: misadventures with one's penis or sabotaging

democracy in order to serve the corporate lobby?What will help us understand public policy: following the latest scoop on a royal wedding in England…or learning about the merits of Keynesian economics from bona fide scholars?

And so it goes: Millions will be fully apprised of a congressman's sexual misadventures and the marriage of British aristocrats even as they remain utterly oblivious to the fact that trickle-down economics is a hoax and that tax-cuts for the super-rich and for Big Business have HURT the economy instead of HELPING the economy. But…whatever. Haven't you heard? **Prince William and Kate Middleton are getting married!**