

The Cult of Safety Explodes

It was the 1970s. Dry cleaning bags lurked quietly behind couches waiting patiently for the opportunity to pounce on the hapless child who dropped a Lego nearby. Unguarded five-gallon buckets stood brazenly in the middle of basement floors hoping to entice their next drowning victim. Discarded refrigerators prowled the land looking for unsuspecting eight-year-olds to gobble up. GI Joes and Barbies, with the help of their little owners, were making out everywhere.

It is the 2020s. Entire schools ban peanut butter and jelly sandwiches because maybe one kid might have an allergy. Parents get visits from county protective services for letting their children play unsupervised in the park across the street. Jungle gyms are an endangered species. And third-graders are taught to not impose cisnormative constructs, let alone behaviors, on anyone or anything.

The odd thing is that the events described in the first paragraph (except the GI Joe one) were not actually happening on any grand scale. The sad thing is that the events in the second paragraph are.

Admittedly there were children – one assumes – who did manage to trap themselves inside random refrigerators, hence the televised [public service announcements](#) (seriously, and such a seventies solution) asking the public to at least take the handle off of the appliance before heaving it over an embankment or leaving it in a burned-lot in the Bronx.

And admittedly – again, one assumes – a child somewhere somehow managed to get themselves tangled up in a dry cleaning bag. As to the bucket problem, that one is rather hard to fathom but it must have happened at least once to spawn the lawsuit that forced manufacturers to put drowning warnings – complete with a graphic depiction of the inept toddler – on

their buckets.

Whether it was caused by the misadventures of Darwin's children, the ever-burgeoning personal injury litigation field, a cherry-picking sensationalist media, humanity's inability to comprehend statistics, or some combination thereof, society has clearly shifted drastically from a relatively laissez-faire approach to common hazards to – not just a risk aversion or risk reduction model – the codified elimination of risk.

There was once a feeling that hard cases make bad law; it now appears that the concept that any case must make immediate law holds sway.

The process started with some actually pretty necessary common sense notions – drunk driving is not actually cool, dumping toxic waste in salmon brooks might not be a good thing, smoking really can kill you so quit, don't eat lead paint, etc. But these were the easy bits and the organizations and forces behind their implementation soon came to realize that if people started to be more sensible in general, society's need for their input, expertise, and services – their guiding hand – would by definition decrease.

Take, for example, the March of Dimes. Originally started as an effort to both find a vaccine against polio and to help those already stricken, the organization in the early 1960s was facing a dilemma. With the vaccines pretty much eradicating the disease, the group was faced with a choice: declare victory and essentially close up shop or continue forward and not waste the fundraising and organizational skills and socio-political capital they had built up over the previous 20-odd years. They chose the latter and continue to this day as a very well-respected and important group, leading various initiatives to fight numerous childhood maladies.

Just not polio.

In the March of Dimes case, they unquestionably made the right call and they continue to serve a vital function. But to state that there were no, shall we say, personal motivations involved in that decision strains credulity.

This pattern – whether with good and righteous intent or not – was and is being repeated over and over again as lesser people and groups actively search out something – anything – that could theoretically possibly be misused or can even remotely be deemed questionable (everything is questionable – all someone has to do is ask the question) to latch onto and save us from.

Whether out of true concern or some other nefarious motive – power, profit, societal purchase – the inexorable march towards the bubble wrap of today that was launched by the professional caring class continues all the way from the classroom to the living room to the newsroom to the board room.

The nefarious motives seem to be coming to the fore of late, with those who would control the entire society in the name of safety brazenly touting their desires under the rubric of “better safe than sorry – and we can make *you* very sorry very quickly.”

Obviously, we saw this process in real time in the pandemic effort. From “two weeks to stop the spread” to fully vaccinated people being shamed/told to wear two masks a year later, to the laughable “We did the best we could” claims of the present day, this continuing impact is a perfect example of a cultural power version of “gain of function” experimental research principle being implemented not in a lab but in society at large.

The censorship movement is also part of the attempt to perma-coddle the world. Different thoughts are deemed both literally and figuratively dangerous, so for the safety of the general

public they must be stopped. This is not only a media issue but a personal one as well as staying quiet is always safer than saying anything, let alone anything that may offend the perpetually offended.

Language itself is being made safer, as the euphemisms once only used by the absurd or the public relations department have become standard speech. If you can't say anything unsafe, eventually you can't think anything unsafe.

And there is of course [the ultimate safety of the infant](#). Cared for, caressed, and controlled, the ultimate expression of the cult of safety is the demand by adults to be treated like children.

A bargain is being made: dependence for safety – barely enough stuff to get by, more than enough entertainment to pass the time, and a new pill for any new perceived ailment, all in exchange for staying quiet and compliant.

You will be safe and secure, but never completely secure because that would obviate the threat that the easy (but empty) life you enjoy could be [whisked away on a whim](#).

And the process is being sold in the name of progress.

But this form of – or bastardization of – progress is in fact antithetical to the tenets of a free society. By worshiping at the altar of the safe, we denigrate, delay, and deny the myriad possibilities for human advancement that are inherent in the concept of risk.

It may seem to be a bit of leap to claim that the proposition that children should be warned to stop eating lead paint led inevitably to having children ask people what their preferred pronouns are so as to avoid even the semblance of giving offense, but this form of incrementalism cannot be easily controlled once started.

And this is one slippery slope on which a Cuidado Piso Mojado sign is nowhere in sight.

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