

neoliberalism and the media

EDITED BY
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ROUTLEDGE

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NUMINOUS FORTUNE AND HOLY MONEY

Dave Ramsey's Cruel Optimism

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Proselytizing for neoliberal capitalism has become an American cottage industry. Such cheerleading for neoliberalism is often guised as the “straight talk” of “just plain folks” circulated via mass media. Scores of media personalities and self-appointed pundits have attained quasi-celebrity by advising their readers, listeners and viewers on budgeting, wealth management and lifestyle strategies. Simply put, financial self-help is Big Business in and of itself.

Dave Ramsey is one such straight-talking pundit—and a rich and influential one, at that. A prophet of austerity-to-prosperity, Ramsey is among America's most successful financial self-help personalities. The flagship of the Ramsey Solutions media conglomerate, “The Dave Ramsey Show,” is a syndicated talk radio program that airs on more than 550 stations, claiming a listenership of more than 12 million (By The Numbers, 2016). Ramsey's show promotes a faith-based system of money/debt-management for its predominately middle-class (and presumably white) listeners. For Ramsey and his acolytes, “Financial Peace” is realized through strategies of austerity and self-discipline, taking on additional work to repay debts, abstaining from using credit and, eventually, amassing wealth.

The Ramsey Solutions media empire includes “The Dave Ramsey Show,” book publishing, live events, classes, podcasts, audio and televisual recordings, a newspaper column and Financial Peace University, a nine-week training program hosted (at no cost to Ramsey's organization) by churches. Ramsey's materials implicitly and explicitly promote neoliberal ideology through discourse linking the broad, populist appeals of Christianity, Western democracy, “free markets,” familial duty, patriarchy, patriotism, and notions of capitalism's naturalness and inevitability.

This essay is an ideological analysis of Dave Ramsey's best-selling book, *The Total Money Makeover*, to parse how its messages implicitly and explicitly

promote neoliberal ideology. It is argued that Ramsey persuades by melding the bootstrap narrative, the appeal of American “givens,” and a self-presentational style akin to Lakoff’s (2002) “strict father” model, delivering an oversimplified message to an audience desirous of “straight talk.” Ramsey’s rhetoric supports neoliberal ideology by overlapping popular American mythologies and motifs to deliver a message of virtuous independence that is attained, quite simply, by (first) paying one’s bills and (then) amassing wealth. Building wealth is a virtue, and the wealthy are the virtuous.

Ideological Criticism

Ideologies are rarely overtly stated. Most often, ideological messages are implicit in texts that are—ostensibly at least—not even about ideology. This is to say that the ideologies of a given culture are embedded in its cultural artifacts. Through incessant repetition of embedded ideological messages, we come to understand ideologies as natural, inevitable and of essence.

This essay uses the method of ideological criticism, a type of rhetorical criticism used “to discover and make visible the dominant ideology embedded in an artifact” (Foss, 2004, p. 243) to understand why Ramsey’s message supports neoliberalism and how he makes himself credible for his followers. With more than 5 million copies in print since its first publication in 2003 (By The Numbers, 2016), Ramsey’s *The Total Money Makeover* is the best-selling of his numerous self-help books on lifestyle and personal finance. Hence, the book is a paradigmatic example of Ramsey’s teachings. Ideological critics examine artifacts to determine the nature of the ideology it explicitly or implicitly promotes and to detect the rhetorical strategies that persuade the audience to accept the ideology (Foss, 2004, pp. 244–245). First, the critic examines the artifact to ascertain which beliefs and values of a culture are made valid in the artifact and which are elided and/or invalidated. Whose worldview is promoted and whose is suppressed? Then, the critic’s task is to understand the rhetorical strategies used to persuade for the identified ideology.

Data analysis for this study consisted of a three-step process of: (1) data management; (2) data reduction; and (3) concept development. The first step of this study was to make a close reading of the entire text while meticulously taking notes. From the notes, I created a list of recurrent terminology. Next I used an open coding system (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002, p. 219) to develop a set of high-inference categories with which to establish running themes from the text. Conclusions from the data analysis were made through a process of analytic induction (Atkinson, et al., 2003, pp. 143–144). This schema provides a cogent procedure to unveil the ideological underpinnings and to explain the persuasive strategies of *The Total Money Makeover*.

Defining Neoliberalism and Neoliberal Ideology

The meaning of neoliberalism continues to evolve semiotically. Neoliberalism is generally understood as designating *laissez-faire* economics, globalization, deregulation, privatization, and free trade (Chomsky, 1999; Giroux, 2011, 2015; Kotz, 2015; Ong, 2006). Hardt and Negri (2009) suggest that neoliberalism is the exploitative action of transnational corporations to privatize public services and commonly held wealth, such as natural resources (pp. 137–138). With deregulation, neoliberalism has established unimpeded momentum that is impervious to government control. Enjoined in a transnational network, local and national economies are dominated by global, neoliberal economic forces—and, thus, global neoliberal practice becomes the de facto setting of all micro-economies connected within this network (Castells, 2009, p. 424). As such, the impact of local politics and local economies on corporate sovereignty is all but erased (Giroux, 2015, p. 133).

Neoliberalism is a condition/syndrome, a heuristic and an ideology. Ideology functions as a way of convincing people to accept their lot—that “how it is” is made to seem natural, normal and inevitable. As ideology, neoliberalism sustains itself through connections or perceived connections with longstanding, often unquestioned “givens” of Western culture, such as consumerism, capitalism, democracy and individualism. Berlant (2011) contends that neoliberalism, much like any institution and/or structure of power, perpetuates itself through the production of a certain subjectivity. For Berlant, neoliberalism fosters a sense of economic autonomy and self-determining agency that only *feels* like empowerment (p. 15). As such, neoliberalism functions as a heuristic: individuals “learn,” through an experience of “self-discovery,” that predatory practice yields independence and agency. All the while, these seemingly “empowered” subjects are speeding the momentum of a greater transnational force that will eventually exhaust, outmode and disempower them. In this way, neoliberalism motivates a “false notion of freedom which it wraps in the mantle of individualism and choice, and in doing so reduces all problems to private issues” (Giroux, 2015, p. 127). However fictive these ideas and associations may be, such appeals to notions of freedom, individualism and choice continue to reinforce neoliberalism’s ideological staying-power and coherence.

Ramsey’s Audience

So, who exactly is Ramsey’s audience? Ramsey’s website provides figures for his audience’s demographic breakdown, including gender (51 percent male/49 percent female), education (25 percent high school graduates, 51 percent college graduates and 20 percent post-grad), household income (21 percent \$30,000 or less, 31 percent \$30,000–\$50,000, 30 percent \$50,000–\$75,000, and 18 percent \$75,000+), marital status (71 percent married) and age (85 percent

between the ages of 25 and 54)¹ (Demographics, 2016). There is no mention of how Ramsey's organization obtained these figures. And as per Ramsey's information, *none* of his audience is childless.² In addition, the racial/ethnic breakdown, perhaps tellingly, is elided entirely.³ Still, Ramsey's information, provided it is accurate, suggests that his audience is primarily lower middle class—or thereabouts, with 52 percent of households earning \$50,000 or less annually.

Dave Ramsey's Riches-to-Rags-to-Virtuous-Riches Backstory

Dave Ramsey's story is an archetypal American narrative of (more or less) sin and redemption—a redemption that is followed by ample success. A real estate broker, Ramsey built a net worth of over \$4 million by age 26, all the while “living large,” beyond his means. “I was good at real estate, but I was better at borrowing money,” he explained (Ramsey, 2013, p. 3). Predictably, Ramsey's prosperity façade fell apart after a major creditor's bank was sold to a larger corporation. Ramsey was audited, foreclosed upon and bankrupted in 1986.

By 1992, Ramsey recast himself as a financial self-help expert, self-released the first edition of his best-selling financial self-help book, *The Total Money Makeover (TMM)*, and launched The Lampo Group, LLC, the parent corporation for all of Ramsey's companies. Ramsey's media and financial counseling enterprise has mushroomed into an empire with over 550 employees (About Us, 2016). He has written or co-authored 15 books, with a combined sales total of around 10 million. His radio show is broadcast by 575 affiliate stations. Ramsey writes two newspaper columns (“Dave Says” and “Dave Ramsey's EntreLeadership”) published in 450 newspapers worldwide. As of early 2017, Ramsey holds an estimated net worth of around \$55 million (Dave Ramsey Net Worth, 2017).

With these riches and notoriety comes the power of influence, or vice versa. Is Ramsey rich and famous *because* he is influential, or is Ramsey influential *because* he is famous and rich? Power equates with money, which for the most part equates with fame. So, while the abovementioned quandary is in its way unfathomable, it is still quite telling inasmuch as it bolsters the claim that hegemonic power perpetuates itself, a foundational premise of this article.

Indeed, millions upon millions of people have purchased or at least been exposed to Ramsey's products and services. Ramsey's influence is probably most profound for those who enroll in his educational programs: over 4.5 million in Ramsey's Financial Peace University, over 2 million high school students in his Foundations High School Program, over 90,000 college students in the Foundations in Personal Finance College Program, and over 25,000 users of the Foundations in Personal Finance Homeschool Edition (By The Numbers, 2016). For these people, his “students,” Ramsey is a powerful man indeed—a household name and trusted advisor.

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As Ramsey tells his story, excess and hubris led to a fall. That fall was followed by a period of contemplation, a redefinition—or perhaps a rebranding—of the self, a program of self-discipline/austerity, and a subsequent ascendancy to a heightened plane where virtuous actions yield real money. And, for those who stay the path of righteousness, both the money and the quality of virtue multiplies exponentially. Ramsey's thesis doesn't always correspond with today's economic and mathematical realities. But Ramsey's acolytes are the faithful. They are the plain-talking Everymen, the True Believers. And when appeals to faith, spirituality, plain talk and common sense are invoked, it is easier for those perceiving themselves as the faithful, plain-talking and commonsensical to overlook the numbers. It is also easier to see the world as a level playing field where anyone can achieve success through self-discipline and righteousness.

Ramsey's Neoliberal Ideology

Ramsey is an influential individual whose message functions as ideological indoctrination delivered as "straight talk." Quite often, ideological messages are disguised as, or inscribed in, "common sense" narratives about mundane, day-to-day practices. Ideological messages are most effective when embedded in texts that seem to be about something else. "Ideology never says 'I am ideological'" (Althusser, 2005, p. 86). In *TMM*, Ramsey tacitly delivers a neoliberal message that articulates faith, economics and optimism to form a "common sense" narrative that presupposes and construes a historically contingent neoliberal Truth.

Throughout *TMM*, Ramsey continually reminds his readers that his ideas are simply good judgment and Everyman's gumption. In *TMM*'s introduction, Ramsey opines that his maxims "are common sense, which isn't so common anymore" (p. xi). Ramsey then leads his readers through a series of seemingly commonsensical premises toward the certain conclusion that anyone can pay their way out of debt and into prosperity—given the necessary discipline and resolve, that is.

Ramsey's discourse is an amalgam of quintessentially American attitudes, archetypes and motifs supporting neoliberal Truths. This essay will explain how the neoliberal messages of *TMM* are interwoven in and inseparable from the rhetorical strategies used in their delivery. This is to say that the book's incessant barrage of running themes and archetypes are so mired in cliché that their use precipitates a style of delivery—and vice versa. The common themes and archetypes of the book summon up a kind of kneejerk cognitive connection with certain ways of expression where the theme/archetype predetermines its style of delivery—just as the styles of delivery both summon and bolster the embedded Truths of the themes and archetypes. As such, I will identify the running themes of *TMM* that bolster neoliberal ideology individually and in

tandem with the analysis of the rhetorical strategies used in their delivery to avoid redundancy. Finally, an assessment of how the identified themes and rhetorical strategies work together in service of the catch-all neoliberal ideological message that underpins the book will be offered in this essay's conclusion.

Authoritative Voices: "Straight Talk," Strict Father Morality and Prosperity Ministry

Ramsey portrays himself as wise, but ever so curmudgeonly, much similar to the personas used by actor Wilford Brimley and TV psychologist Dr. Phil. While he boasts his own expertise,⁴ Ramsey is, nevertheless, dismissive of intellectuals and the academy, both of which he paints as elitist. Such anti-elitism is a hallmark of the speech of political conservatives and religious fundamentalists. Ramsey uses simple language to convey that he, too, is Everyman. Tellingly, Ramsey's use of "Everyman" as an epicene term denoting both male and female or as a catchall for "everyone" underscores the patriarchal basis of his narrative. Both tacitly and implicitly correspondent with the hierarchic structuring of fundamentalist Christianity and capitalism itself, Ramsey's family unit is led by men who make financial decisions for the family. Thus, the Everyman narrative exemplifies how Ramsey's discourse excludes or at least marginalizes women.

Simplistic speech that regularly alludes to "plain folks" is one of the seven common propaganda devices defined, famously, by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis. This "plain folks" rhetorical strategy works best when "members of society's political or social elite court the public by appearing to be just ordinary folks and therefore wise and good" (Sproule, 1997, p. 135). Ramsey continually evokes "plain folks," all the while eliding that he himself is both rich and powerful, and, as such, a member of the elite he condemns.

The family metaphor is a longstanding trope of political conservatives and religious fundamentalists. Here, the nation-state is cognized as a family. Conservatives and fundamentalists use this metaphoric scheme so incessantly because both collectivities are patriarchal hierarchies whose political ends are best served through rhetorical strategies evoking the family structures they so revere. Lakoff (2002) terms the conservative family metaphor the "Strict Father model" (p. 13). With the Strict Father model, leadership is male, or at least *gendered* male. Here, an authoritarian leader (the Strict Father) mentors his "children" (the citizenry) using a leadership style presuming that "the exercise of authority is itself moral; that is, it is moral to reward obedience and punish disobedience" (p. 67). In tone and style, Ramsey takes on what is more or less a Strict Father role: he admonishes his "children" (listeners/readers) when they err and praises them when they righteously stay the path.

Some of you are so immature that you are unwilling to delay pleasure for a greater result. If you will make the sacrifices now that most people aren't willing to make, later on you will be able to live as those folks will never be able to live.

(Ramsey, 2013, p. 5)

Here, Ramsey's paternalistic "straight talk" frames paying one's debts as a path to freedom, spurring his readers to stay the course and tacitly bolstering neoliberal ideology.

Through the Strict Father role, Ramsey summons the voice of patriarchy, not only referencing and in service of the traditional, heteronormative family, but also referencing and in service of a greater hierarchy—the patriarchal relationship between God and man.⁵ Ramsey positions himself as the Strict Father and, by proxy, as the conduit or voice of God. And who is more authoritative than God himself?⁶

Ramsey is not an evangelist per se, but he openly acknowledges his ideas' bases in Christian faith. With appeals to optimism and independence, Ramsey's message is quite similar to the proselytizing of well-known prosperity ministers such as Joel Osteen, T. D. Jakes, and Paula White. Prosperity ministers proffer a straightforward formula for success where religious faith is a precondition for power and affluence. Faith is the precursor that functions to externalize the internal, thereby yielding physiological health, social capital, success, and fortune (Bowler, 2013, p. 7). In other words, making money is, effectively, the outward manifestation or transubstantiation of immaterial faith in the form of material wealth. In this view, the faithful are certain to succeed financially. Neoliberal capitalism is understood as a meritocracy with a moral hierarchy. "If you are a good person, it is your spiritual duty to possess riches for the good of mankind" (Ramsey, p. 198).

Ramsey (2013) confidently offers a "proven plan to win" (p. xi). Ramsey's message of empowerment emphasizes individual responsibility, all the while eliding the inbuilt and very real structural inequalities of U.S. neoliberal capitalism. Ramsey's post-millennial variant of prosperity ministry sermonizes a privatization of faith (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001). With God's help, individuals find autonomy to provide for themselves. As Ramsey posits, disciplined individuals of faith who work hard and persevere will eventually and inevitably prosper in a free market economy. A champion of privatization and deregulation, Ramsey urges the worldview that autonomous individuals, empowered by faith, take full responsibility for their health and welfare in a cruelly competitive—but also natural and inevitable—market economy.

This is the real world where sad old people eat Alpo! Please don't be under the illusion that this government, one that is so inept and dim-witted with money, is going to take care of you in your golden years.

(Ramsey, 2013, p. 51)

Ramsey holds out the promise that with the knowledge he imparts on his shows and in his books, people can indeed pay off their debts—and thrive, even. In this way, an individual's failure to prosper is not the fault of an inequitable system—it's the fault of the individual for not having the enabling faith and discipline necessary to prosper *within* the system. If a virtuous populace shoulders its own financial burdens, there is no need for the social safety net of government. "Those who are worried about polarization, about the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, need not look to the government to solve the problem; just call for a national Total Money Makeover" (Ramsey, 2013, p. 48). In this way, Ramsey's individualist message bolsters the neoliberal ideology that free market capitalism is a just and natural system. Ramsey's appeal to Western individualism thus reinforces allegiance to the "innate moral equilibrium of the marketplace" (Bowler, 2013, p. 226) and reaffirms the existing socioeconomic order.

The strategy of intermeshing elements of faith, independence, American optimism and a notion of responsible business practice to deliver a populist, "common sense" message is a common tactic of prosperity ministers. In *TMM*, Ramsey positions himself as a plain-talking realist whose quasi-mystic teachings reveal The Truth, which is realized/enabled *through practice*. "What I do is help people understand and act on time-honored truths about money that will truly change their lives. ... The stuff I teach is the truth" (Ramsey, 2013, pp. xiv–xviii). Ramsey counterpoints "myth" and "truth" as a structuring conceit for the book, going so far as to use the dichotomized pairing as a bold print sub-heading a total of 34 times. Throughout, Ramsey evokes faith, God and the Christian Bible⁷ to bolster this Truth, including directly citing various translations of the Bible 11 times. Ramsey's Truth is simply worded and doesn't necessarily *seem* esoteric. But in practice, Ramsey's "straightforward" counsel yields a complex entanglement of attachments to and entailments with long-standing religious, cultural and economic forces. This intermeshing *imblicates* the individual's money management actions into a complex set of transnational interactions. In this way, Ramsey's acolytes are hailed, indoctrinated into and ensnared by neoliberal ideology.

Ramsey conflates notions of responsible citizenship, faith, wealth and virtue to function, mutually, as doctrine, an aggregation of ideas that define right and wrong and provide direction in blunt and oftentimes oversimplified ways. Doctrinal speakers like Ramsey order their narratives to first bolster familiar, seemingly secure ideas, such as God and family, then to introduce some form of peril—in Ramsey's discourse, these threats are insolvency, debt, and bankruptcy—and, finally, to suggest a course of action that reaffirms the espoused doctrine (Hart, 1971, p. 253)—in this case, a doctrine and ideology of "Financial Peace."

Through repeated exposures, we become conditioned to respond to certain evocative terms, mottoes, and catchphrases. Ideological and doctrinal language

is typified by idioms and adages that operate as “ideographs,” culture-bound, high order abstractions that operate as Truths. Rhetors use ideographic terminology such as “right of privacy” and “freedom of speech” (McGee, 1980, p. 6)—or “free market economy” and even “truth,” as Ramsey often does—as a means of *circumventing* persuasion. Ideographs, which Ramsey frequently invokes, spur immediate associations that limit our analytical/interpretive capabilities by “prohibit[ing] our appreciation of an alternative pattern of meaning” (p. 9). In other words, Ramsey’s rhetoric is steeped in the ideographic dialect of hegemonic power, a vocabulary of seemingly simple terms whose use may drive the foreclosure of meaning(s).

At its core, Ramsey’s ideological message is a message of optimism that is (yet again) similar to those espoused by prosperity ministers. “This book [TMM] has given [readers] hope to win, and that hope has caused them to take action and claim ultimate victory over their financial struggles and worries—and to actually *win!*” (Ramsey, 2013, p. xi). For prosperity ministers and Ramsey, optimism breeds its own momentum: Those who are optimistic set higher goals that are realized through ardent discipline. “The cheerfulness and optimism which the prosperity gospel called for were *cultivated* habits that had to be worked at but which would lead to success in every realm, including the economic” (Bowler, 2013, p. 232). Still, this urged optimism might be, or at least function as, a way of convincing the “Common Man”⁸ not only to accept that his lot is natural and inevitable, but to be happy about it. Such convincing is the goal of neoliberal ideology.

Ramsey’s Cruel Optimism

“Success” is never quite so simple. To aspire to something is to forge a connection with it. We aspire to social statuses, jobs, knowledge, material goods, anything that is denotative of exchange power (i.e. money) and, even, to the political itself. To desire or aspire to something necessarily requires a sense of optimism(s). As Berlant (2011) explains, to aspire to something impels not only the cognitive attachment to a desired object or goal, but a series of obligational entanglements. “When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and to make possible for us” (p. 23). But obtaining an object of desire is more than a simple *quid pro quo*. We become attached not only to a sought-after object and/or status, but also to the complex set of relational interactions through which the object of desire is acquired. If we lose or can never acquire an object of desire, we mourn not only the loss of or the inability to acquire the object itself, but also the loss of the associations that our foreclosed ambitions entailed. Sometimes we want what we don’t need—and when we get it, there are unanticipated, negative repercussions.

Other times we don't get what we want—and, even if we didn't really need what we thought we wanted, the loss of the perception of opportunity is, nevertheless, devastating. Our attachment to the object of desire provides us a way of defining ourselves and our lives. Berlant defines these entanglements as “cruel optimism,” “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object [of desire]” (p. 24). Here, Berlant's concept explains why someone might grieve the loss of a conquered addiction, or stay in an abusive relationship or continue to amass debts—or to remain, steadfastly, on a journey toward Financial Peace, for that matter.

TMM, which Ramsey frames as a challenge to America's dominant ideology of debt, might also be understood as supporting the dominant ideology of neo-liberal capitalism. Ramsey's teachings, which he claims offer “biblically based, common sense education and empowerment that give HOPE to everyone in every walk of life” (About Dave, 2016), might also be termed cruel optimisms because: (1) they urge debtors to stay in the system and, thus, on the proverbial treadmill; (2) they enmesh and/or conflate preexisting, dominant U.S. ideologies of Christianity, capitalism and patriarchy in ways that mutually support all three constructs, thereby perpetuating multiply interrelated structures and systemic inequalities of power as status quo; (3) they serve to ensnare followers in a host of entailments, such as unrealistic workloads and staying obligated to debts with exponential interest rates,⁹ that may not, in fact, yield the desired results of Financial Peace; and (4) Ramsey's purportedly universal plan for Financial Peace is most effective for people with high income. The lower one's income, the less leverage/agency they will have to affect the desired change. In other words, a person with a large debt who makes a lot of money can pay off their debts and thereby “buy” Financial Peace, whereas someone with a low income and a comparatively small debt may not be able to ever pay their debts and acquire Financial Peace—no matter how tenacious, disciplined, virtuous and faithful they may be. And for those who can't afford to buy themselves out of debt, Ramsey's buoyantly stern Strict Father admonitions to pay off debts, no matter what, are cruel optimisms, indeed.

Testimonials and Number-Crunching

The testimonial is a common figure of ideological persuasion (Sproule, 1997, p. 135). *TMM* is generously peppered with accounts of people achieving Financial Peace under Ramsey's tutelage to bolster the book's “Everyman” narrative and attest to the program's efficacy—to “prove” that Ramsey's plan works for everyone, as promised. These accounts, however, are as telling for the information they omit as for the information they provide. There is much talk of dollar amounts saved—but no mention of the incomes of those making the testimonials. One family claims to have paid off a \$57,000 debt and given

\$7,000 to their church in just six months (p. 6). A married couple claims to have paid off \$58,000 in debt and saved \$18,000 for an emergency fund in 10 months (Ramsey, 2013, p. 82). And yet another family claims that its sole, predictably male, breadwinner accepted a \$4,000 per month reduction in pay to pursue another, more interesting career (p. 110). This begs the question of how much would one have to be making to accept a \$4,000 reduction in monthly pay, all the while paying off debts and affecting a Total Money Makeover. Throughout *TMM*, Ramsey uses the testimonials of people who claim to have paid off debts in a year that are equal to or greater than the total yearly incomes of over half of his audience.¹⁰ These examples suggest that Ramsey cherry-picked the testimonials of more affluent followers for their ability to quickly pay off debts,¹¹ thus “proving” the informal fallacy that if X is true for A and X is true for B, then X will be true for all: if these prosperous, virtuous people can do it, then you can, too.

Neoliberal Strategies Yield Ramsey Solutions

Ramsey is, for all intents and purposes, a preacher for neoliberal capitalism whose business model unsurprisingly mirrors neoliberal practice. A consummate salesman and evangelizer of his own cause, Ramsey liberally fills his literature and shows with plugs for his other books and other shows. And when Ramsey is not hawking his own wares, he’s quoting someone else doing it. In one testimonial, David Jarrett, a Ramsey follower, says he bought multiple copies of *TMM* to give to friends as a way of sharing the wealth. “I ordered twenty copies of *The Total Money Makeover* and have enjoyed giving them to my coworkers so they, too, can experience what it’s like to be debt free” (Ramsey, 2013, p. 43).

Ramsey’s business practices are remarkably similar to neoliberal strategies—especially in terms of infrastructure. Most of his seminars and training sessions, such as Financial Peace University—which is *not* free to attend—are held in churches or religious schools. Likewise, Ramsey’s organization commonly recruits clergy and church members to teach his courses.¹² A brochure targeted toward churches touts that by offering Ramsey’s courses, churches can build a stronger base of tithers, increase donation revenues, and “raise a culture of generosity by helping your people beat the debt that keeps them from giving” (Information Guide, 2016). Here, Ramsey has streamlined the common neoliberal strategy of outsourcing. Effectively, he has conscripted free labor and secured free venues. With evangelical fervor, Ramsey converts followers to his cause as a community outreach. And these followers carry the proverbial torch by then zealously promoting Ramsey’s products and classes to others. In this way, Ramsey’s message of austerity, discipline, optimism and faith yields him big profits.

Debits and Credits: Summing Up

Ramsey's common sense worldview finds its basis in the amorphous religiosity of just plain folks and cruel optimism. Melding common sense narratives of populism, patriarchy, and patriotism is a time-honored persuasive strategy of preachers and politicians alike that Ramsey has maximized to fullest potential. He pushes these familiar appeals a step further, however, through a bit of rhetorical sleight of hand. Ramsey deftly straddles the tangible, lived world of economics and the intangible world of the spiritual by positioning himself as *neither* a prophet nor an expert, *either* a prophet or an expert, and as being *both* a prophet *and* an expert—whichever of these argumentative positions works best, given the exigencies of a particular utterance. Ramsey paints himself as a rebel who mounts his opposition from within the system: He is a rich capitalist who defies lenders and America's culture of debt; he is suspicious of academics and avowedly anti-elitist; the personal finance strategies he advocates are framed as nonconformity, nevertheless promoting the system and ideology of the existing economic order. *TMM's* packaged rebellion yields a contingent neoliberal Truth that is *anything but* emancipatory for the lower-middle class readers Ramsey claims as over half of his audience. Given economic and mathematical realities, only those with high incomes are truly able to instantiate Ramsey's virtuous vision. For the rest, Ramsey's cruel optimism only serves to perpetuate a system of axiomatic "givens" whose end result is to keep plain folks endlessly on the treadmill, in endless thrall of numinous fortune and holy money.

Notes

- 1 Ramsey's figures overlap. There is no explanation as to whether someone with an annual income of \$30k would be classified as "\$30k–\$50k" or as "\$0–\$30k," for example.
- 2 The "number of children" figure is another example of bad math, accounted as follows: one child—23 percent, two children—41 percent, three children—22 percent, and four+—14 percent. Oddly, there is no accounting of people without children.
- 3 The 33 photographs in *TMM* may provide clues as to the racial/ethnic breakdown of Ramsey's audience. Of the photos, 28 (almost 85 percent) are of Caucasian families, 3 (just over 9 percent) are of families of color, and two (just over 6 percent) are indeterminate.
- 4 In *TMM*, Ramsey says, "I seldom list my formal academic credentials because, honestly, I don't think they are important" (2013, p. xvii).
- 5 Here, I deliberately used the epicene "man" as denotative of all people to illustrate the pervasiveness of patriarchy.
- 6 Here I use *sexist/exclusivist* language that defines God as male, just as Ramsey does, to illustrate my point.
- 7 All of these evocations function as ideographs.
- 8 Ramsey's speech and writing often include similar sexist/exclusivist, patriarchal terminology.

- 9 An alternative not mentioned by Ramsey, but which might be useful for some of his followers, would be filing for bankruptcy and thus erasing the debt.
- 10 As per Ramsey's breakdown, 52 percent of his audience make \$50,000 or less per year (Demographics, 2016).
- 11 A more cynical interpreter might even conclude that the testimonials are not real.
- 12 Ramsey Solutions calls the instructors of Financial Peace University sessions "advisors." Financial Peace University advisors are not paid. They are not exclusively clergy or church members, but most are.

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