Fragment 21
"Free Lunches" Courtesy of the Petty Bourgeoisie

If you can't smile, don't open a shop.
Chinese proverb

Not long ago I spent a few days with a friend in Munich at the home of her aging parents whom she had gone to visit. They were relatively frail and largely confined to their apartment, but insistent on walking briefly in the cool summer mornings in their immediate neighborhood. For several days my friend and I accompanied them on their morning shopping rounds, and "rounds" they were. They went first to a small grocery, where they bought a handful of vegetables and some nonperishables; then they proceeded to a nearby shop that carried butter, milk, eggs, and cheese; then to a butcher for a small pork loin; then to a stall selling fruit; and finally, after pausing to watch children playing in a small park, to a newspaper stand for a magazine and the local paper. It seemed a nearly invariant routine, and at each shop there was always a conversation, brief or extended, depending on the number of other shoppers. There were comments on the weather or on a recent traffic accident nearby, inquiries after mutual friends and relatives, mentions of births in the neighborhood, questions on how a son or daughter was getting on, reflections on the annoying traffic noise, and so on.

One could say the conversations were shallow and filled with little more than pleasantries, the small change of daily life, but they were ***never*** anonymous; the discussants knew one another's name and a fair amount of each other's family history. I was forcibly struck by the easy if thin sociability that

prevailed and came to realize that these rounds were the social highlight of my friend's parents' day. They could easily have done most of their shopping more efficiently at a larger store no farther away. On a moment's reflection, one sees that the shopkeepers are unpaid social workers, providing brief but amiable companionship to their steady clientele. "Unpaid" is, of course, not quite right, inasmuch as their prices were surely higher than at the larger outlets; the shopkeepers understood implicitly that the smiles and pleasantries they offered were one way in which they built up a steady and loyal clientele and hence their business. Lest we become overly cynical about the mask of shopkeeper smiles, however, it is worth noting that such pleasantries may well also take the hard edge off a day otherwise spent behind a counter cutting, weighing, and counting money.

The petty bourgeoisie in this small setting perform a kind of daily and reliable social service free of charge that would be hard for a public official or agency to replicate. It is merely one of many gratuitous services the small shopkeepers find it in their own interest to provide in the course of doing business. Jane Jacobs in her deep ethnographic insights into the texture of neighborhoods and public safety has catalogued many of them.[15] Her phrase "eyes on the street," a wholly original observation in 1960, has become a contemporary design principle for urban neighborhoods. It refers to the constant informal monitoring of a neighborhood by pedestrians, shopkeepers, and residents, many of whom are acquainted with one another. Their presence, the animation of the street scene, works to informally preserve public order, with little or no need for intervention. The point for our purposes is that "eyes on the street" requires a dense, mixed-use neighborhood, with many small shops, ateliers, apartments, and services that

ensure the steady foot traffic of people on errands, window-shopping, or making deliveries. The anchors of this process are the petty bourgeoisie shopkeepers, who are there most of the day, who know their clients, and who keep an informal eye on the street. Such neighborhoods are far safer than more deserted locales with little foot traffic. Here again a valuable service, in this case ensuring public safety, is provided as a by-product of a combination of other activities and at no cost to the public. Where such informal structures are absent, even the police will find it difficult to maintain effective safety.

The petty bourgeoisie provided services, like the smile of the shopkeeper, that simply cannot be purchased. Jacobs noticed that on virtually every block there was at least one shopkeeper with long hours whom residents asked to hold their apartment keys for out-of-town relatives and friends who would be using their apartment briefly while they were away. The shopkeeper provided this service when asked as a courtesy to his customers. It is impossible to imagine a service like this being provided by a public agency.

It is surely the case that "big box" stores can, owing again to their clout as buyers, deliver a host of manufactured goods to consumers at a cheaper price than the petty bourgeoisie. What is not so clear, however, is whether, once one has factored in all the public goods (the positive externalities) the petty bourgeoisie provides—informal social work, public safety, the aesthetic pleasures of an animated and interesting streetscape, a large variety of social experiences and personalized services, acquaintance networks, informal neighborhood news and gossip, a building block of social solidarity and public action, and (in the case of the smallholding peasantry) good stewardship of the land—the petty bourgeoisie might not be, in a full accounting, a far better bargain, in the long run, than the

large, impersonal capitalist firm. And, although they might not quite measure up to the Jeffersonian democratic ideal of the self-confident, independent, land-owning yeoman farmer, they approach it far more closely that the clerk at Wal-Mart or Home Depot.

One final fact is worth noting. A society dominated by smallholders and shopkeepers comes closer to equality and to popular ownership of the means of production than any economic system yet devised.