

When Efficiency Becomes the Problem

The moment a menu system values a person only by yield, margin, and demand, it has stopped optimizing a product and started exposing its moral premise.

A menu proposal can sound rational long after it has ceased to be humane. That is the central provocation of Jonathan Swift's **A Modest Proposal**: not simply that a grotesque product is imagined, but that exploitation becomes almost invisible when translated into familiar commercial language—supply, yield, customer demand, labor savings, and market opportunity.

Swift's speaker begins with a problem that is difficult to dispute. Poor mothers and children crowd the roads and doorways, mothers are driven to beg, and children without support may become thieves or leave their country. The problem is presented as large, urgent, and expensive. It appears to call for the kind of disciplined intervention that any organization facing a system-wide challenge might recognize: define the affected population, isolate the cost drivers, test existing remedies, and propose an intervention that can operate at scale.

That resemblance is precisely what makes the satire dangerous. The speaker claims to have studied the issue for years and dismisses earlier schemes as based on faulty calculations. He then supplies numbers, weights, age thresholds, allocation rules, and market forecasts. Of 120,000 poor children, 20,000 are to be retained for breeding and 100,000 sold at one year old. A newborn's weight is estimated; its later weight is calculated; its supposed nutritional value is described. The proposal acquires the surface texture of a serious operating plan.

But precision cannot rescue a corrupt premise. The calculations do not clarify the human problem. They help conceal it. Once children are converted into inventory, the questions become how many can be supplied, when they reach marketable weight, who will buy them, and how much profit their mothers can receive. The speaker's most horrifying achievement is to make the language of optimization feel more orderly than the reality of poverty.

For anyone responsible for menu innovation, this is a useful warning about the limits of unit economics. Cost, yield, supply availability, and executional simplicity are necessary questions. They are not sufficient ones. A proposal may be inexpensive, scalable, and operationally elegant while still revealing that the organization has defined the customer, the supplier, or the affected community as a resource rather than as a participant with legitimate interests.

Swift repeatedly demonstrates how commercial logic can manufacture apparent stakeholders. The scheme supposedly benefits mothers through an immediate profit, relieves them of the cost of raising children, supplies wealthy diners with a new delicacy, creates work for cooks and taverns, enriches landlords, and increases national wealth. The list is comprehensive enough to resemble a favorable business case. Every transaction is counted as a benefit. The suffering that makes those transactions possible is excluded from the ledger.

That omission is not a minor analytical flaw. It changes the identity of the product. The proposed food is not merely offensive because of what it is; it is offensive because the entire system has been designed to make consumption appear beneficial. The child's body becomes food, clothing material, and entertainment. The mother's care becomes an input to improve product quality. The landlord's prior exploitation becomes a justification for claiming the remaining asset. Even slaughterhouses are imagined as ordinary infrastructure. The proposal does not merely commodify people. It builds a supply chain around their commodification.

The satire also exposes a recurring temptation in innovation: treating consumer appeal as evidence of legitimacy. Swift's speaker imagines the product at dinners, weddings, civic feasts, and other public entertainments. If wealthy people will buy it, if cooks can prepare it, and if the market can absorb it, the proposal is presented as validated. Yet demand does not settle whether a product should exist. It only demonstrates that someone is willing to purchase it. Commercial success can amplify a bad premise rather than correct it.

The strongest indictment arrives when the speaker lists humane alternatives: taxing absentees, buying domestic goods, reducing luxury, improving thrift, ending faction, and showing mercy to tenants. He does not claim these ideas are unknown. He claims there is no sincere will to put them into practice. The grotesque proposal becomes necessary only because ordinary reforms have been repeatedly refused.

This distinction matters. Swift is not arguing that difficult social problems require shocking creativity. He is showing what happens when decision-makers demand that every solution be cheap, easy, self-contained, and immediately effective while refusing the reforms that would challenge their own privileges. The absurdity is not that the proposal is too radical. The absurdity is that exploitation is treated as practical while responsibility is treated as unrealistic.

For a menu leader, the lesson is not to abandon commercial discipline. It is to widen the definition of the business case before approving it. Ask not only whether an item can be sourced, produced, priced, and sold across hundreds of locations. Ask whose labor, vulnerability, or identity is being converted into margin; which costs have been pushed outside the model; what the product implies about the people

represented in it; and whether the likely public reaction would expose a contradiction between the brand's stated values and its commercial behavior.

Swift's proposal is "modest" only in its tone. Its real subject is the danger of confusing a clean calculation with a sound decision. A system that can measure everything except human worth may look efficient right up to the moment its efficiency becomes the scandal. The moment a menu system values a person only by yield, margin, and demand, it has stopped optimizing a product and started exposing its moral premise.