

Politics and the Moral Purpose

Two years ago, in a notorious rant – a performance credited with spawning the Tea Party movement – business journalist Rick Santelli, reporting from the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade, lambasted the Obama administration’s recently announced foreclosure relief policy. “This is America!” Santelli thundered. “How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor’s mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can’t pay their bills? Raise your hand.” The complaint is notable for more than its questionable syntax. Santelli’s tirade, directed at the purportedly foolish families facing foreclosure and those in government who would assist them, underscored what is perhaps the defining political reality of our nation today. Interestingly, Santelli vented his rage not at the sophisticated financial institutions that peddled predatory products to consumers, but at the consumers themselves. Debates about public policy have assumed an air of pettiness, economism, and indifference (or outright hostility) toward the poor. While Census Bureau figures show an astonishing 43.6 million Americans dwell in poverty,¹ few politicians bother to mention their fate. Though the poor may comprise one in seven of the nation’s citizens, they live at the margins of society. Many were born into poverty and expect to die in it. Feeling so disengaged, their rates of political participation are substantially lower than their more affluent countrymen. If scant votes are to be won by championing the interests of the poor, politicians calculate, then why make concerted electoral appeals to them – much less advocate programs specifically directed at the underclass? In the run-up to last November’s mid-term elections, everyone from Tea Party candidates to President Barack Obama heralded the great American

¹ Chris Gentilviso. “Census: Poverty Pummeling 43.6 Million Americans.” *Time* 16 Sep. 2010. 6 Feb. 2011. <<http://newsfeed.time.com/2010/09/16/poverty-in-america-at-its-highest-peak-since-1960s/>>.

middle class, while the poor went virtually unmentioned.² It is not difficult to surmise the reason. As demonstrated in Santelli's soap box performance, the American right sees no role for government in addressing income inequality or fostering the welfare state, to use what has become a term of opprobrium. Meanwhile, while the incidental effects of Democratic policies like health care reform, unemployment compensation, and financial regulation benefit the poor, those initiatives are justified on the basis of their advantages for the middle class or the much-venerated virtue of economic growth. And it took the Great Recession to precipitate the administration's signature policies impacting the poor, whereas President Lyndon Johnson waged an explicit War on Poverty amid the economic boom times of the 1960s. As the Johnson administration's Great Society demonstrates, it is not unprecedented for the nation to focus on improving the lives of the poor. The great moral challenge of the Millennial generation is to infuse our political system with a moral sense that, in recent decades, has been lacking. If we are to achieve anything resembling the good society, we have no other choice.

Adam Smith – a man much revered but seldom read by today's free market fundamentalists – married moral principles and economics as few economists dare to do today. The 18th century Scottish Enlightenment thinker is remembered primarily for his contributions to economic theory, but he was, first and foremost, a moral philosopher. The author of a work entitled *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith's seminal work, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, is tinged with a concern for the wellbeing of the vulnerable. "No society," Smith wrote, "can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of

² Michael Fletcher. "Capitol Hill Reaction to Poverty Figures Sidetracked by Political Concerns." Washington Post 17 Sep. 2010. 6 Feb. 2011.
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/17/AR2010091707346.html>>.

the members are poor and miserable.”³ The deepest wishes of laissez-faire adherents notwithstanding, providing for the needs of the “poor and miserable” cannot be accomplished in the absence of a robust welfare state. And as Smith’s concern for the fate of the poor attests, there is nothing inherently radical with making provisions for the lower and working classes – to say nothing of the middle and upper classes, which benefit in direct and indirect ways from government-supported education, health, and environmental programs. It was the 19th century German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck – nobody’s idea of a leftist bleeding heart – who instituted a system of universal health care. The conservative Bismarck recognized that it behooved him to have a populace whose essential health needs were being met. Callous disregard for Germans’ livelihoods risked restiveness, riots, and revolutionary overthrow of the existing regime. With roots in Bismarck’s 1883 legislation entitling German workers to health insurance, the welfare state became a hallmark of Europe, particularly as countries reconstructed themselves in the aftermath of the Second World War’s carnage. And it remains thus. Even in the United Kingdom, a nation that resembles the United States in its adoption of the free market ethos, the country’s Conservative Party pays its respects to social welfare schemes, including the socialized health care system, the National Health Service. Confronting charges that he planned to chip away at the NHS – and offended at American depictions of the service as a totalitarian myopia – Conservative Party leader David Cameron campaigned in 2010 on a promise to maintain and even strengthen the NHS. “I’ll cut the deficit, not the NHS,” Cameron pledged.⁴ When now Prime Minister Cameron reneged on that promise in his recent budget, proposing cuts to the NHS, Britons took to the streets in protest – and in defense of the notion that the social

³ Adam Smith. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. 1776. Reprint. (Edinburgh: University Press, 1827) 33.

⁴ Robert Winnett. “David Cameron Sets Out 20 Policies to Boost NHS.” *Daily Telegraph* 4 Jan. 2010. 6 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/election-2010/6931790/David-Cameron-sets-out-20-policies-to-boost-NHS.html>>.

contract between a government and its citizens *matters*.⁵ How is it that our counterparts across the pond are so fiercely defending their system of socialized health care, while a comparatively modest law extending the status quo of private insurance is marred in the United States as an intolerable assault on the fundamental rights and privileges of the American people? The answer lies in a coarsened domestic political discourse and a smallness of purpose in American public life.

None of the problems plaguing political discussion in the United States can be blamed squarely on any one individual, faction, or generation. Econocentric rhetoric afflicts Democrats, Republicans, Independents, liberals, conservatives, and moderates. It pervades our analysis of global challenges. Fossil fuel dependence is perceived as a problem less because climate change is a significant threat than because we must nurture American-grown energy, including dirty coal and oil. When Egyptians massed in Tahrir Square to oppose the cronyism, corruption, and repression of Hosni Mubarak's dictatorship, many American commentators' chief concern was not human rights or democracy but the impact the tumult would have on oil prices. When political leaders advocate increased federal support for education, it must be based on the expected economic return, rather than any intrinsic value in cultivating the minds of the nation's young. Martha Nussbaum, the noted University of Chicago philosopher, treats this problem in her eloquent treatise, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. While President Obama is correct in his observation that "economic progress and educational achievement have always gone hand in hand in America," other aspects of education, like its capacity to inculcate critical thinking, cultural literacy, and a keen appreciation for a multiplicity of world

⁵ Allegra Stratton. "David Cameron: Even My Family is Worried by NHS Reforms." *Guardian* 1 Feb. 2011. 6 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/feb/01/david-cameron-nhs-reform>>.

perspectives, have become afterthoughts, if they are thought of at all.⁶ When the State University of New York at Albany responded to budget shortfalls by eliminating programs in French, Italian, Russian, classics, and theatre, National Public Radio reported that the humanities had fallen victim to a mentality that prizes money-making majors over those whose advantages, however numerous, are less tangible. “[P]erhaps the reason these cuts in the humanities at SUNY have garnered so much attention,” NPR ventured, “is because of a fear that these disciplines are less career-oriented than business and technology, less valued in a world dominated by the bottom line.”⁷ Somewhere between Thomas Jefferson’s call for citizens of ward-republics to have adequate time to nurture their intellectual lives so that they may be intelligent participants in public affairs and today’s utilitarian, instrumental view of education, the nation lost its sense of just why it seeks economic growth. As Nussbaum asserts, “a strong economy is a means to human ends, not an end in itself.”⁸ A thriving economy makes a vibrant intellectual life possible. If a society chooses to value liberal education and expose its people to the humanities in addition to the other great disciplines, the populace will absorb the virtues of empathy, human understanding, and cultural awareness. A compassionate society requires a broad-based approach to humanities education, one steeped not in national self-congratulation and jingoism but in awareness of ethnic, political, religious, and racial diversity throughout the world. Such an approach guards against xenophobia and indifference or insensitivity to others’ modes of living.⁹ In short, it instills empathy. While critics derided President Obama in 2009 for stating he wished to appoint a Supreme Court justice with empathy, that very capacity is indispensable if citizens are to care about their less fortunate fellows, take measures necessary to solve their problems,

⁶ Martha Nussbaum. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010) 137.

⁷ Margot Adler. “Cuts to University’s Humanities Program Draw Outcry.” *National Public Radio* 16 Nov. 2010. 8 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.npr.org/2010/11/15/131336270/cuts-to-university-s-humanities-program-draw-outcry>>.

⁸ Nussbaum 10.

⁹ Nussbaum 86-87.

and, ultimately, to establish the basic sense of fairness and justice upon which a stable society depends.

Shortly before his death, the eminent historian Tony Judt penned an impassioned call for a political discourse rooted in the principle of the common good. A longtime supporter of the welfare state and an activist for social democracy who also contributed mightily to the scholarship of his profession, Judt trained his historian's eye on the social and political context of the problems he treated. Social mobility in the United States, he found, has dramatically decreased in the three decades since the genesis of the deregulatory, anti-welfare zeal that remains central to American political dialogue. In a nation that prides itself on its meritocratic ethos, the social class one is born into is now more predictive of one's socioeconomic status as an adult than at any point since the middle of the 20th century.¹⁰ With citizens less likely to ascend the socioeconomic ladder, income inequality "corrode[s] the trust and interdependence on which civil societies rest."¹¹ Inequality positively correlates with disease, crime, and mental illness in a society.¹² Poverty degrades its victims, but no less significant, it tears at the social fabric of the nation. Can we be bothered to care?

The moral outrage of poverty cannot be expunged in the absence of a fundamental paradigm shift in American public affairs. Judt cites 19th century British philosopher John Stuart Mill, who castigated the "repulsive" idea of "a society held together only by the relations and feelings arising out of pecuniary interest."¹³ The moral corruption informing economic injustice is characterized by just the sort of view which holds that people are, above all else, economic actors. Their utility in powering the national and global economy is prized above such frivolous

¹⁰ Tony Judt. Ill Fares the Land (New York: Penguin Press, 2010) 16.

¹¹ Judt 8-9.

¹² Judt 18-19.

¹³ Judt 55.

concerns as their quality of life, their moral values, and their cultural achievements. Therefore, the schizophrenic unemployed, whose untreated illness renders healthy social interaction virtually impossible, is depicted as undeserving of public assistance. If one is physically capable of performing work, then gainful employment should present itself and all will be well. The economic crisis, which has ensnared legions of once-middle class workers and put many out of work for extended periods, effectively rebuts this free market dogma. As capitalism is the worst economic system – except for the alternatives – it is imperative to ground the free enterprise system in a moral framework, one which acknowledges that the whims of the market often leave millions out. Moreover, the time has come to discontinue thinking of a market economy and a genuine concern for noneconomic factors as mutually exclusive. As the growing movement to measure Gross National Happiness shows, factors like health, education, culture, diversity, and social cohesion say just as much about the way we live now as more-frequently-cited figures on consumer confidence and Gross Domestic Product. Enhancing those heretofore-ignored aspects of life necessitates the implementation of more socially egalitarian principles. The innate moral sense within us that the study of the humanities so often reawakens tells us that the profession of one's parents or the community in which one is raised should not consign an individual to a preordained place in our society. This notion exists in tension with the laissez-faire piety that it is not the government's role to remedy economic inequality or provide health care or education. Which deeply-ingrained principle ought to guide our polity? One need not step outside the numbers-driven culture of American policy analysis to reach an answer. As the social democracies of Scandinavia underscore, levels of trust and social well-being are highest in those nations with the lowest levels of social and economic inequality.¹⁴ We can simultaneously satisfy

¹⁴ Judt 66.

our desires for a fair and equitable society while maintaining the harmony and order so essential to any economic powerhouse.

Reaching the point at which the terms of public debate shift will require surmounting formidable, deeply entrenched obstacles. When Congress passed a health care law in 2010 extending coverage to 32 million additional Americans – still short of the estimated 50 million uninsured persons residing in this country – opposition was vociferous, not unlike Santelli’s heated reaction to the Obama administration’s alleged “bailout” of irresponsible, undeserving homeowners. While the law was not the government takeover its opponents feared, it did represent incremental progress toward a goal long sought by presidents of both political parties – expansion of access to health coverage. But the law could not be justified in such terms. In what, alas, was likely an accurate reading of the pulse of the American body politic, advocates of health care reform emphasized not its promise of expanded coverage – the majority of Americans already had insurance of some kind, thank you very much – but the reduction of health care costs.¹⁵ To lament this fact is not to deny the pressing need to arrest the inexorably rising cost of health care in this nation. But that the preponderance of the American people could not be roused from their slumber to support the principle that health care is a basic necessity of life – not just the province of the entitled – paints an unflattering portrait of our national priorities. Coverage was merely a notable side effect of cost reduction – not the other way around.

As daunting as the task of crafting a more empathetic discourse may be, it must not intimidate us into complacency and resignation. If the 20th century – a bloody, brutal hundred

¹⁵ Karen Tumulty. “Cost, Not Coverage, Drive Health Care Debate.” *Time* 13 May 2009. 8 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1897843,00.html>>.

years, but also years of tremendous advances in social, cultural, and technological affairs – teaches us anything, it is that no generation is incapable of effecting change. Human agency can be employed for good or for ill. It can sow the seeds of discord and bigotry, or it can summon the better angels of our nature. When Aneurin Bevin pioneered the push for the National Health Service in the United Kingdom – and when Lyndon Johnson made the eradication of poverty one of the government’s chief objectives – it was clear that determined individuals can take up the mantle of positive, humanitarian change. The Progressive movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries did not arise accidentally. It was, instead, a response to the Gilded Age of untrammelled capitalism and exploitation of American workers. Key Progressive reforms – child labor laws, for instance, and antitrust statutes – remade the economic playing field, and are taken for granted in today’s political climate, however troubling other strains of modern thinking may be. The Progressives highlight, then, a very simple truth. It would be far from unprecedented for a new set of moral visionaries to take charge – and it is by no means impossible for them to reshape the contours of social and political debate. As the trailblazing Margaret Mead said, “Never underestimate the power of a small, dedicated group of people to change the world; indeed, that is the only thing that ever has.”