

End of the Experiment?

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The experiment — by which I mean the representative democracy of the United States of America — having been conducted for two and half centuries, may be nearing its end. By that, I don't mean to imply that the nation will vanish (perhaps, although I doubt that...), but rather that the delicate balancing act between the two conflicted viewpoints at the heart of our nation may be coming to unhappy resolution in a point of no return. The question is this: *Can we humans create a culture that allows for and harmonizes two of our strongest, deepest, and most contradictory motivations?* Those motivations are, on the one hand, the headlong pursuit of wealth for personal gain, and, on the other, some semblance of equality and justice in society.

This hasn't ever been exactly what we'd call a fair fight. Wealth has always reigned as the heavyweight champ, both here in America and throughout the world over the history of what we blithely call civilization. Equality and social justice are merely a middleweight challenger, which has managed to land some good punches and win an occasional round, but was never expected to win and has been consistently behind on the scorecards. The founders of our country were almost exclusively wealthy white landowners who sought to protect what they had. They were, however, influenced by the radical social philosophies expounded during the Age of Reason (i.e., the Enlightenment), so they built in certain protections in designing the nation. Wealth has always come first, though.

More and more as time goes on, I worry that the outcome is no longer in doubt, that the issue has been settled, and that the challenger probably won't be standing at the end of the bout. The decision seems all too obvious: Wealth has won, and equality/justice has lost. Even worse, I fear that the winner will have little time to savor and celebrate its victory before it too is destroyed, not at the hands of its opponent (who currently lies prostrate and struggling to rise before the count to ten is reached), but by the onset of overarching catastrophes that wealth does not acknowledge as imminent and refuses to head off at the pass.

That is, I think, a means-versus-ends problem. The long fight between the two opposing approaches to core values has now become so embittered and spiteful that no true dialogue is possible. In the past, supporters of each side included thoughtful commentators who sought to better inform us about the struggle to

achieve both principles. Such people still exist, but their voices have been mostly drowned out. This is no longer a polite debate with honorable intentions on both sides. At this point, it's devolved into a winner-take-all grudge match, a no-holds-barred struggle to the death, a kind of total war where the first casualty has been the truth.

Much of this has to do with the calculated perversion of language to enhance the attractiveness of blatantly false narratives. When conservatives speak of "shrinking government" by "cutting red tape and reducing needless bureaucracy," to help "fortify and improve our economy," that's actually a code for removing legitimate and hard-won protections essential for the safety and wellbeing of the public, but which get in the way of rampant greed. This reframing is designed to convince voters to support policies that are not at all in our interest and, instead, serve only the wealthiest among us. The sad fact is that this reframing strategy has worked spectacularly well in America (and other countries, such as Britain), since the 1980s.

The Right has consistently sharpened its single-minded focus to a razor's edge, and it always goes for the jugular. Republican Representatives and Senators in Congress stand in front of media microphones and cameras and say with straight faces that their "Tax Reform" Bill is designed to benefit the middle class. What a crock. The same applies to eliminating the estate tax (which the Republicans call "the death tax"), which will not benefit the middle class at all, but only further insure continuation of uber-wealthy family dynasties. Do Republicans understand within themselves how ridiculously false their assertions are? Do they secretly know in their hearts and minds that what they stand for is giving more and more to the rich, and leaving the rest of us to fight over whatever scraps fall from the table? Or have they been lying for so long now that they no longer even remember that they're lying and have come to believe their own false propaganda?

When Trump speaks of re-negotiating trade deals to "make America great again," he conjures up images of happy, well-paid (white) workers in American factories. His real intention, however, is to attract manufacturing back to America by further gutting trade unions, removing all regulatory protections, and privatizing what remains of the public commons. In reality, Trump wants to return America to the cheap-labor sweatshops of the 19th century and the Third World.

And while the Right has taken simple lying and spun it into a high art form, so much so that almost nothing any Republican says is trustworthy or believable any more, I don't let the Democrats off the hook, either. The Left is frequently lost in the woods and often feckless, bickering within itself over identity politics. Still in disarray a year later over blowing an election they expected to win, the Democrats have once again shot themselves in the foot (with the Donna Brazile brouhaha) by replaying internal divisions over the 2016 campaign — this at the

very time that Robert Mueller's investigation is gaining serious traction. That's another gift (to the Republicans) that keeps on giving.

The proponents of top-down wealth have worked so hard for so long and are now so close to winning outright control of the country that they effectively own both major political parties, who are indebted to Big Money (i.e., MegaCorporations and ultra-wealthy individuals) to the point of enthrallment.

While the founders were careful to mandate a clear separation between Church and State, America does indeed have a national religion. No, it's not Christianity, although one can be forgiven for assuming that. The American religion is Capitalism, and it's sacrosanct. The irony is that while the virtues of Capitalism (and the supposed terrors of Socialism) are trumpeted from on-high, we do in fact have Socialism in this country — it's just that the Socialism we have is for corporations and the ownership class.

Early on in the 20th century, Capital Gains were taxed at the same rates as earned income, but Big Business and the wealthy hated that, so they bought the government (through lobbying and campaign contributions) and had the Capital Gains tax knocked down. They would eliminate it completely if they could. Should the opportunity arise, they will.

Real Estate is notorious for its lack of taxation, which is how Donald Trump made his fortune. Sure, ordinary folks get a tax deduction for mortgage interest, but that's peanuts compared to the free lunch on massive deals made by Real Estate Moguls. The American Dream of single-family home ownership is now shrinking as the percentage of home owners steadily decreases. Why? Because prices of homes have increased so much. Banks control the housing market through interest on mortgage debt, which stimulates housing prices to go ever higher, setting up boom-and-bust cycles. The last housing bust was in 2006, caused mainly by graft and greed, which set the stage for the massive and dangerous derivatives meltdown of 2008 that led to the "Too Big to Fail" mythology that has been in place ever since.

For awhile in the second half of the 20th century, federal and state government welfare programs for less well-off sectors of the public were part of America's giving a leg up to allow people a better chance of reaching the middle class. Well, that's pretty much gone now. But welfare (think Socialism) for business and the wealthy is alive, well, and thriving.

Meanwhile, the Voodoo Economics of neoliberalism remains the staple diet of our government and major institutions. Economics has always been arcane, theoretical, and vulnerable to crazy schemes (such as Friedrich Hayek and his "free market, supply-side, trickle-down" Chicago School, embraced by Thatcher in England and Reagan in America and still widely believed today). I wonder what seminal economic theorists from the past — Adam Smith, David Ricardo,

John Stuart Mill, and the like — would think if they could rise from their graves and see the shape of 21st century economics. I doubt that they would be pleased.

In the America of 2017, the stock market is now disconnected from the real economy, which benefits only the investment class. The FIRE sector (Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate) has replaced manufacturing as the way Big Business makes money. Megacorporate CEOs are rewarded not for productivity gains or profits from business, but for elevating the share price of their stock, all too often through company buy-backs of its own shares. Friends, that's nuts, and it's setting us up for a very hard fall. I don't know when that will happen, but on the way to that disaster, we are racing toward neofeudalism, where the rich own everything and the rest of us are debt-indentured serfs.

Readers might conclude that I'm a dyed-in-the-wool progressive, but that's only partially correct. Yes, I'm clearly more on the side of equality and social justice than the freedom to pursue wealth at any cost to the collective, and my cultural values are more progressive than conservative. What I fervently believe in, however, is not any particular political slant, but rather human fallibility and our need to protect ourselves from our own insanity. Over my lifetime, I've admired both selected Republicans and Democrats for their willingness to work in the very difficult and troubled political arena. I respect dedicated public servants of every stripe — conservative, liberal, or apolitical.

Sadly, I regard America's two major political parties as failing, senile institutions that no longer serve the public good, but instead pander shamefully to their financial backers to sustain their influence. Republicans were once the party of Lincoln (as they are fond of pointing out) and sound fiscal conservatism. Democrats were equally conscientious in their own way, and politics was about pragmatic horse-trading. Compromises were struck with a minimum of rancor. But all that is gone. Basically, we've allowed Big Money to buy both parties. Republicans and Democrats alike are, if not owned outright by Big Money, at least in thrall to it. Check out the amount of time our representatives in Washington, D.C., devote to fund-raising for re-election — it's more than half their time, and more than they spend in total on their legislative duties. If that's not dysfunctional, I don't know what is.

While I like the idea of populism and grass-roots movements, I don't think much of the nativist-nationalistic-faux populist political uprisings that have emerged in recent years, such as Marine Le Pen's National Front in France and Brexit in Britain. Too often, these movements reflect a regressive and hateful brand of nationalism that is jingoistic and xenophobic. Like the major political parties here, they too are funded by Big Money interests, which benefit by keeping populations divided and internally at odds.

I've written for quite a number of years now my opinion that reform of our society may be impossible. With great reluctance, I fear that something dreadful (or, more likely, a number of dreadful things) will have to occur before we awaken sufficiently from the toxic dreams that have taken us so far from reality.

About a third of all American families are hanging on by their fingertips, living from paycheck to paycheck, one job loss or family illness away from financial ruin. America is the only major industrialized nation that has a for-profit health industry. Despite the sincere efforts of hundreds of thousands of dedicated medical professionals, our health care system is already pushed to the breaking point. Given the way things are in this country with Big Pharma and Insurance, that cannot fundamentally change for the better any time in the foreseeable future. Those who are well off will get medical care; those who are not will scrape by or fall by the wayside.

Discussion of other important considerations stretching us past our limits are beyond the scope of this brief commentary — climate change, increasing militarization and ongoing wars, the ever-rising costs of education, the pension fund crisis, and the nefarious activities of the invisible Deep State, to name just a few. Alternatives to all those conditions could be implemented, but the will to even consider them is conspicuously absent, despite the wishes of at least half of the public.

Breakdown of the American Empire is already underway. So far, it's a slow-motion collapse, but that could change. Not that I'm insensitive to the human suffering that would result from major disruption. That possibility hurts my heart, but it seems obvious to me that we're headed down that road.

I hope I'm wrong. I hope we get our act together before the ship goes over the falls onto the rocks below.

I'd prefer to write optimistic, comforting, and inspirational commentaries. While I'm still able to be positive and helpful in my private session work with individual clients, writing about where we are as a society is altogether more challenging. Collectively, humanity faces daunting problems more serious (and dangerous) than any we've encountered over our brief history on earth. Our very survival as a species is now in question, and that terrible possibility makes time precious.

No one can take on the task of saving the world, but each of us can make a difference. Collectively, that means grass-roots activism, cooperation, and responding to whatever crises emerge in the best, most sane ways we can. Individually, it means working on love and compassion to deepen the ties that bind us together rather than increasing the divisions that separate us.

Time is running out, and the work is right in front of us. Let's do whatever we can before the sand runs out of the hourglass.