

What We Tried

by Bill Herbst

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I want to follow up on last week's commentary ("The American Experiment") by expanding a bit more on what I wrote then.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s — from Rosa Parks through the Black Panthers — resulted in serious debate in America about what we might do to address, and hopefully diminish, the systemic racism that has plagued humanity and America for so long. Various strategies were discussed and implemented. These included political, social, and economic efforts, and occurred within many different institutions, both governmental and social.

Over time, our reactions to these efforts spawned further and sometimes very conflicting strategies. Looking back on the past 50 years, it seems obvious to me that the results were mixed. Some of the evidence — the data — used in hindsight to make the many judgments was objective, based on serious research and hard facts. Other evidence was more subjective in nature. Overall conclusions were, as always, influenced by the particular perspective of the person or organization doing the analysis. We all have our axes to grind, and "data" can be easily manipulated to serve those biases. That doesn't mean that a particular conclusion is necessarily wrong or invalid, but it is always important to consider the source in assessing any judgment. So, I'll repeat what I write often about my commentaries: My take on the results of all our efforts within the social, economic, and legal playing fields to achieve racial equality and justice is just my personal opinion.

I need not detail all the strategies we've tried, but they tend to group in two opposite directions: from the left, liberal/progressive efforts designed to give a "leg up" to those who have been historically shut out from opportunity for advancement and the rewards of the "good life," and from the right, conservative/reactionary "law and order" programs. Examples from the left include "Affirmative Action," school busing, and racial quotas for college entrance or employment in business, while policies from the right include "Three Strikes," "Stop-and-Frisk," and the resulting disproportionate incarceration of black men in a burgeoning (and for profit) criminal prison system.

Along the way, we've seen significant demographic changes in leadership through racial integration. In the 1960s, very few blacks had authoritative roles in our institutions — almost no elected officials and few leaders within higher education or law enforcement. Paradoxically (although maybe not paradoxically at all), the military is the most notable institution that attempted to integrate racially, although the higher ranks have remained primarily white. Now, however, we have numerous black legislators, black mayors, black police chiefs, and we've even had a black president. The thinking was that allowing blacks to rise to positions of authority, responsibility, and leadership would bring an equalizing influence within our society.

Well, none of that worked to change American racism — not the various programs and policies from left and right, and not the integration of institutional authority. Black people, and to a lesser extent the entire range of ethnic minorities, did not become part of "Us." They remained as "Them," and in some ways became even more Them. It turned out that having more blacks in positions of authority didn't change much at all. For various reasons, most ended up serving the existing system and the status quo hierarchy. Authority remained regressive. Meanwhile, "We" continued to be white and privileged. (In a similar way, getting more women into boardrooms didn't do much to alter gender inequality in the world of business. As CEOs and executives, too many women tended to operate as "men in skirts.") Basically, nothing we tried reached down into the depths of the American psyche to alter our longstanding attitudes of white supremacy and male dominance.

Over the last half century, however, affluence became more important than skin color. Being rich was what mattered most, while being white slipped to second place. More and more, our country was dedicated to the pursuit of personal wealth. That's always been a huge part of the American Dream, but it grew even more extreme in the past half-century. America is now almost entirely run by and for the Haves.

White factory workers and unskilled wage-earners, who had previously enjoyed at least the possibility of upward mobility and a better life for their children, were thrown under the bus as we globalized and outsourced manufacturing. The FIRE economy took center stage — Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate.

This change — to a global economy — had many consequences. I want to write here about one particularly complex repercussion.

As the white population on the bottom half of the economic ladder lost stature, respect, support, and opportunity, those negatively affected began to doubt the prevailing narratives mentioned above that held sway in America since the New Deal, namely, that one could indeed move up the economic and class ladders,

and that one's children stood an even better chance. This turned out not to be true. Wealth was transferred upward to those at the top and didn't flow down to benefit those below.

But rather than blaming the wealthy, many of those in the bottom half turned their ire toward minorities and government. Some voices, especially on the left, suggest strongly that this has been a "Let them eat cake" class war conspiracy created intentionally by the powers that be: Keep the drones fighting amongst themselves so the queen bees get most of the honey. I don't see that as a conspiracy, *per se*, more a confluence of many self-interested factors. But no matter. For whatever reasons, the "losers" tended not to aim their anger at the "winners," but instead blamed other groups of losers for further diminishing their shrinking share of the economic wealth pie. While white supremacy and mistrust of government have always been enduring factors of American mythology, they became more focused as rationales of resentment. The Red State/Blue state, rural/urban, and heartland/coastal divides grew increasingly polarized.

The failure of Obama's promise of Hope and Change — caused in part by increasing disillusionment with the American Dream among Republicans and disenfranchised lower-class whites, in part by absurdly accelerating wealth inequality, and in part by extreme anti-government backlash — led directly to Donald Trump's unexpected win in the Presidential election of 2016. Trump wasn't pushed over the top for his slim victory only by the votes of unemployed white factory workers, of course — many of those who were better off, privileged, and wealthy supported him also. This revealed that a widespread dynamic had emerged, one that made for very strange bedfellows.

Whenever a significant percentage of one demographic slice of a culture's population stops believing in the dominant narrative — and it doesn't matter whether that narrative is true or false, accurate or not — the "infection" of doubt, loss of faith, and scapegoating spreads throughout the whole culture. Alternative narratives, often extremely nostalgic for an imagined past that actually never existed, become attractive. Social media not only supports but encourages the additional element of bogus and crazy conspiracy theories that augment that retreat into a fictional past. Trump was the poster-child for these reactionary narratives of grievance (Mexicans are rapists, Blacks are criminals, every other country on earth takes unfair advantage of our generosity, etc.), and his particular brand of snake-oil salesmanship fit perfectly into the growing discontent (and often rage) felt by a significant plurality of people across the entire spectrum of American life — rich, poor, and in-between.

And so, for the past three years, America has tried that. Needless to say, it hasn't worked well. About all that "Making America Great Again" has achieved is to make America crueler, stupider, and more pathetic. Rather than apply the

term “failed state,” I prefer to think of America as a “sick giant.” Of course, the Coronavirus pandemic has made that metaphor a reality. Would the current upwelling of protest against racial injustice and authoritarian violence by law enforcement have arisen without the background of three years of crazed narratives followed by the pandemic? I’m not certain, but I’m inclined to think that they’re all linked.

What will we try now to try to heal our toxic racism, improve conditions for those on the bottom half of the economic ladder (whatever their ethnicity and skin color), and move America a little closer to realizing the ideals of equality and social justice? Reform of our institutions is obviously called for, but the bulk of reforms we’ve attempted the past half century through legislation and other forms of social engineering has resulted in no real progress at all. What are the chances that another wave of similar reforms will succeed this time?

As much as I am concerned about corruption within the institutionalized system (meaning the entire structure of how we conduct ourselves as a society, a nation, and with each other), I’m finally more concerned about the corruption lurking deep within our psyches — corruption that is no longer hidden, but perversely celebrated. The authoritarian impulse toward control, domination, and repression of others as a way of protecting ourselves is deeply embedded in human beings and tends to erupt whenever fear of suffering or loss is present. Cooperation is also embedded in our natures, but civilization has always emphasized power over love. Negotiation requires patience and maturity, and civilization tends to prefer the more primal and adolescent application of force.

What seems to work best as an agency of positive change (in its effectiveness and lack of blowback) is the development of power guided by love — the application of gentle, persuasive pressure enabled by the ability to see oneself in others. More of Us and fewer of Them. Individually, movement in that direction toward more inclusion and less exclusion occurs within one person at a time. It’s slow and iffy. Some people never move in that direction, while others do. The inner work of self-examination — questioning one’s beliefs and assumptions — can result in increased compassion and understanding. Not always, but frequently. The more vexing issue is how to promote that process collectively.

In 2020, Jupiter, Saturn, and Pluto are clustered together in a small arc of the zodiac, so humanity as a whole is at the beginning of three significant and long-term astrological cycles — Jupiter-Pluto, Saturn-Pluto, and Jupiter-Saturn. This tells me that we’re at the beginning of a major period of renewed passion and intensity for the difficult effort of collective change. Two of this trio of cycles begins in late Capricorn, with the third in early Aquarius. That implies that the first two (Jupiter-Pluto and Saturn-Pluto) announce major changes in the hierarchical, top-down structures of society — authority, government,

institutions, and particularly leadership — with the third (Jupiter-Saturn) signaling substantial shifts in the social order. All three are particularly relevant to economics.

These long cycles are not conscious and intentional. Instead, they represent developments that are forced, in part by literal outer circumstances, and in part by a welling up of raw power. Both factors occur at the intersection of the collective and personal unconscious. They erupt like volcanoes. The pandemic is a potent example of the former, while the public revolt against racial brutality by the police is an illustration of the latter. Especially at their beginnings, these are not cycles where we come together in happy unity to sing Kumbaya. No, we fight within ourselves and with each other about what we should plant anew in the garden of civilization.

As undeniably important as public health and racism are, those concerns are only two of the many urgent challenges we face that are looming as repercussions of our own long-term activities. As we are confronted by this host of cascading crises, one after another — all of which are interconnected and accompanied or provoked by suffering that can no longer be denied, ignored, or tolerated — we'll need a reimagining across the board.

We are learning, quite painfully, about what hasn't worked. Mere "reform" of our existing institutions, laws, and beliefs won't be enough, in my opinion, although nothing more than that will be offered by those in charge. Just tweaking the system didn't work earlier and won't now.

Think back to President George W. Bush's admonition in the wake of 9-11 that *"the American way of life is not up for negotiation. Period."* He then urged Americans to go shopping. Well, Bush was wrong. Even back then, in 2001, the American lifestyle was already unsustainable. Now, two decades later, we're entering the initial phase of monumental pressures and serious negotiations to change it. Most of the metaphors used to describe our predicament — a runaway train, the Titanic trying to avoid hitting the iceberg, etc. — are understatements.

Since we are only at the beginning of this forced transformation of breakdown and destruction followed by possible renewal, it will take some years before we acknowledge the full scope of the necessary changes. Even then, reaching any sort of agreement and collective will to implement the changes will be a huge mountain to climb.

I hope we have sufficient time, sanity, and endurance.