

# Us Versus Them

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I want to address again something I've written about at numerous times over the past decade. What I wrote in those past commentaries still seems to me adequate to express my thoughts and beliefs about the issue of concern, but, once again, we are collectively in the grip of a major national dilemma, so perhaps another visit is warranted.

The issue at hand is *morality*, but not the philosophically abstract concept of morality that often boils down to "good versus evil." Instead, my interest is in morality used as an argument — an arrow in the quiver of debate tools — to justify our reasons and defend our support for implementation of certain practical and pragmatic structures in society over other options. The "structures" to which I refer are basically ways we organize our society through our interactions with each other in business and personal relationship. These organizing principles are sometimes detailed as formal policies, but just as often they are socially accepted norms and customs without the force of law behind them.

In my opinion, the political and economic systems in place within the American Empire over the last century and a half are bankrupt. Maybe they worked better in the past, or maybe they never worked very well, but they sure as hell don't work anymore.

Our winner-take-all approach to politics and the two-party binary system (i.e., Democrats versus Republicans) that emerged out of it may have seemed a reasonable way to resolve our differences at some point earlier in our history, but — from my perspective — that is no longer true. Our current political system, especially at the national level of selecting a President every four years, has devolved into a sham of lies, denial, propaganda, and media performance that is designed only to produce "ratings" (i.e., win votes) rather than illuminate personal and shared realities, whether commonly held or subject to disagreement. Our actual problems as a country are almost never addressed politically. Instead, candidates on both sides offer a litany of bogus reasons for what ails us and how to fix it. The public ends up at least misinformed and perhaps even fooled in every election, and then reacts blindly after one or two unsatisfactory terms, voting to throw out the bums who lied to them, and replace them with the new bums, who are lying to them now. It's pathetic.

Political campaigns have become shows, like traveling minstrel troupes or off-Broadway road companies that tour the country. Political “debate” is conducted only in the most simplistic and extreme sound-bites rather than in serious and nuanced conversations. Most of what Americans read or see is little more than advertising or propaganda for one team or the other. Even though a sizable percentage of opinion in the political realm of campaigns and media commentary is untrustworthy, much of it is swallowed whole as belief by the public (or rejected outright as lies, depending on which team is putting it out and who’s exposed to it).

But politics is only part of the story. Economics, a gargantuan element of our society that looms behind the curtain of our political show and pulls the levers, is an even bigger fiasco. As an economic system, capitalism has long outlived its heyday and strayed far from its origins, to the point where it is now downright monstrous and harmful to the overwhelming majority of us. Whatever the market basis of Adam Smith’s original conception of capitalism was, the ongoing bottom line of current corporate capitalism is that a small group of people at the top take advantage of the masses of people below them and reap most of the rewards of our collective efforts to create value. Meanwhile, the rest of us (meaning the bottom 80%) watch our share of the wealth pie shrink more and more. No wonder so many Americans — right, left, or center — are pissed off.

Our economics has become a system of legalized plunder that has brought us to where we are now — a society where the great bulk of all tangible wealth is owned and held by very few hands, and where extreme wealth inequality rules the day. While unequal distribution of material wealth has always been part of civilization and has waxed or waned from one period to the next, it has never been this extreme in America, not even during the Gilded Age of Robber Barons in the 19th century after our Civil War. It’s no surprise that we once had no individuals who were billionaires — literally zero — while today, according to a quick Google search, there are almost 4,000 billionaires around the world (759 of whom are in America). Sooner than later, we are quite likely to have our first trillionaire. By stark contrast, billions of human beings worry about putting food on the table or surviving any sort of unexpected financial expense.

How did this happen? Not by magic. The elites used the power of their wealth to change the rules of society in their own favor. Put into crude but somehow eloquent terms, the rich and powerful simply bought the government.

Supporters of capitalism have long shouted very loudly that any redistribution of wealth to level the playing field — through progressive taxation, legislation limiting the amount of wealth allowed, or other policies designed to take from the rich and give to the poor — is unfair, immoral, and amounts to theft. They have lobbied that all attempts to redistribute wealth more equitably will severely undermine or even destroy outright the presumed benefits of entrepreneurship.

They hold that redistribution is essentially stealing from the productive rich to give to the unproductive poor, while arguing that capitalism is the *only* system that can guarantee growth, productivity, and innovation.

Meanwhile, those who support a more collectivist economic approach, such as socialism, make the contrasting arguments — that the apparent selfishness and greed that seemingly drive our current economic systems work against the greater good and are immoral, amounting to theft in the opposite direction. They push for changes to eliminate the worst excesses of capitalism, which go beyond just wealth inequality to include devastating boom-followed-by-bust cycles and rampant abuse of natural resources.

To my way of thinking, this debate between the individualist right and the collectivist left boils down to our beliefs about what is fixed and permanent within “human nature.” To invoke morality in the debate seems to me wrong-headed. What we’re really arguing about is how human beings are hard-wired. The right believes that human nature is immutably self-centered (i.e., “selfish”), and that — to paraphrase the Michael Douglas character in the movie *Wall Street* — “*Greed is good.*” The right argues that our economic and political systems *must* reflect that immutable truism of human nature. Curiously, the left seems to agree that selfishness and greed are hard-wired into human nature, but concludes with the exact opposite prescription, arguing that we *must* work against those very tendencies in ourselves.

Understanding the deeper origins of this contradiction are where morality might reasonably enter into the discussion, but not through anything so simple and didactic as what’s right or wrong, good or bad. The moral element has to do with the people we love and with whom we identify in “belonging.” As with so much of human experience, the many different components and factors of our associations with others tend to boil down to family and kinship, whose deep roots go back beyond antiquity to our earliest days as nomadic bands of hunter-gatherers.

The sense of what is right, proper, and moral rests upon who we consider “Us” versus who we consider “Them.” Almost universally, human beings are kind, considerate, and loving toward anyone we see as Us. On the other side, humans are mostly indifferent toward anyone who is seen as Them, at least until we feel threatened or insecure, and then we immediately hate Them. Throughout history, we have been willing and sometimes even eager to kill those we hate. This problem — fear and loathing of “the other” — remains unsolved within human nature and is a terrible problem for society and civilization.

Spiritual avatars and the religions that emerge in their wake attempt to address the problem in numerous ways. For instance, and to use just a single example, we have Jesus’ dictum to his followers of the necessity to “*Love thy neighbor as thyself.*” Sadly, that and similar sentiments turn out to be a very hard sell, and

almost universally failures. Even true believers very rarely live up to the teachings of the individual they revere as Godly. How many Christians truly resemble Jesus in how they live in the world? I imagine there are some, but in percentage terms, it's a darned small number. Many, many seemingly fervent religious devotees cherry-pick what they like from the disciplines of their respective religions. And sometimes they (or their religious leaders) twist those teachings to suit their convenience.

As one very telling example, consider the so-called "Prosperity Gospel" that arose as a movement in fundamentalist American Christian churches during the 1980s and is even stronger now. This belief holds that God wants each person among the faithful to be blessed in this world with physical well-being and material wealth, while illness and poverty are denigrated as curses brought on by breaking covenant with God. Wow. If that's not a wholesale perversion of the original teachings, I don't know what is. Were Jesus alive today, I think he would quite assuredly be downright appalled and horrified that this blasphemy is embraced and pursued in his name.

I feel strongly that love and hate are not simple, nor are they straightforward. In reality, they are often quite twisty and somewhat perverse. For instance, two brothers may treat each other quite badly within their family dynamic. But out in the larger world, if someone challenges one brother, the other instantly comes to his aid and defense. In a similar manner, tribal love is very different from universal love. To see beyond the deep and primal but often dark bonds of family to the less tangible but gentler bonds that confirm and emphasize our essential oneness is no easy task. Sometimes we cannot make the leap at all, but even when we do, it's easy to get wrong, so that what we call "love" is all too often only attachment, wishful projection, or manipulation. To love wisely and well is an amazing but rare achievement.

I want to be very clear: I don't claim to know exactly what is fixed and permanent within human nature, and what could or might be changed. And if such changes can be achieved, I'm not confident that I understand how to do that. Yes, I like to think that our nature is at least somewhat malleable, and I carry certain assumptions about what might work to achieve a more graceful sense of inclusion — namely, it's what I think of "work on oneself" — inward reflection, self-criticism, and long term, disciplined modification of my many routines and habits. But, after 75 years, I'm not 100% certain about any of it.

Having stated that, I don't feel that I need to just shut the hell up and not write or say anything about the various dilemmas that beset us. No, I feel pretty good about writing these commentaries and maintain at least a little hope that some people who read them might benefit. This is so whether or not readers agree with what I write. Thoughtfulness and clarification are, I believe, worthy goals.