

## MORAL SENTIMENTS

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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I can reliably predict at least one outcome of the midterm elections on Tuesday. With the exception of the winners of individual races, almost everyone will be unhappy. If current polling numbers hold, Democrats will be unhappy that they've lost control of the House. Republicans will be unhappy that they failed to regain control of the Senate. Tea Partiers will be unhappy that most of the bums they vowed to throw out of Washington remain in town. Liberal Elites will be unhappy that many people cast votes that appear to betray their own self-interest. And President Obama, after having achieved the most ambitious set of legislative goals in decades, will be unhappy that he's viewed even by some supporters as more like a thin and exotic version of William Howard Taft than like the second coming of Abraham Lincoln.

One notable exception to this vale of misery will be Fox News and the shadow political system the network has generated and sustained. With the emergence of Christine O'Donnell, the Tea Party candidate for Senate from Delaware who seems never to have taken a civics course, the network has another potential superstar.

When I think about the role Fox News plays in the political life of our nation, my mind conjures up explosives and poison gas—not the role these weapons played in World War II, but the uses to which the capacity to produce them was turned after the war ended. If you have an entire industry geared up to produce explosives and poison gas, and then demand collapses, what do you do? You find another way to use them.

Michael Pollan, author of several books on the food industry, explains how this process unfolded. The great turning point in the industrialization of our food, he says, “can be dated with some precision to the day in 1947 when the huge munitions plant at Muscle Shoals, Alabama, switched over from making explosives to making chemical fertilizer.” After World War II, the government found itself with a tremendous surplus of ammonium nitrate, the principal ingredient used to make explosives. It also happens to be an excellent source of nitrogen for plants. Serious thought was given to spraying America's forests with ammonium nitrate. But, Pollan says, the Department of Agriculture had a better idea: spread it on farmland as fertilizer. The chemical fertilizer industry (along with the pesticide industry, which is based on poison gases developed for war) is “the product of the government's effort to convert its war machine to peacetime purposes.”

The equivalent of World War II for the television news business was the 444-day Iran hostage crisis in 1979 and 1980, which began the transformation of news from half an hour a day on broadcast networks to 24/7 on cable news networks. Beginning with the founding of CNN in 1980, and increasing exponentially with the founding of Fox News in 1996, the cable news business confronted the problem of excess capacity: too much time to fill and too little news to fill it.

With the advent of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the food industry confronted a similar problem: too much food to consume and too few stomachs to

consume it. The answer? Convince Americans to eat more, which we obligingly did, with predictable results. Two-thirds of us are now overweight.

The cable news business responded to the challenge of excess capacity in a similar way: convince Americans to watch more news. Much of the programming isn't real news, of course, any more than much of the food we now eat is what Michael Pollan calls real food.

For its part, Fox News discovered what the legendary script doctor Robert McKee proclaims in his book on screenwriting principles. People love stories, he says, and the heart of a story is conflict. Without conflict, you have no story.

For Fox, the primary goal isn't to ferret out the truth; rather, it's to find—or create—the conflict: between Republicans and Democrats, the President and Congress, Tea Partiers and the Liberal Elite, religion and secularism, Juan Williams and NPR, Glenn Beck and Jon Stewart. In this sense, Fox News is to politics as soap operas are to families: a never-ending chronicle of what's broken and who's angry about it. Fox News also has a not-so-hidden agenda: with the exception of Mitt Romney, all major prospective Republican candidates for President in 2012 are on their payroll.

If we step back from the tales Fox tells about America and ask about the meta-narrative in which Fox itself appears as a character, it's hard not to conclude that we're viewing the triumph of capitalism over democracy. With the recent Supreme Court decision to remove limits on corporate and union financing of political advertising, the triumph seems complete. To be sure, the Court left in place a disclosure requirement, though the requirement can be easily subverted. In his opinion on the matter, Judge Clarence Thomas argued that there should be no regulations, no limits, and no disclosure requirements of any kind on campaign contributions. This is capitalism unleashed as a weapon of mass destruction.

In 1776, as the American colonies declared their independence from Britain, Adam Smith published his ground-breaking treatise titled *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Smith coined the phrase "the invisible hand" to describe how self-interest guides the most efficient use of resources within a nation's economy. Public welfare, in this view, comes as a by-product of self-interest. Smith famously writes, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow citizens."

The free-market system, along with its political counterpart, democracy, is based on the obvious conviction that I am motivated by my own interests. Furthermore, it rightly presumes that I know my interests better than anyone else. The theory is that if you take a group of people and set them free to pursue their own interests, better things will happen than if someone else defines their interests for them.

In order for people to be free to pursue their own interests, however, they need to know what those interests are and possess the ability to pursue them. The increasing disparities in education and income among Americans threaten to make our democratic and capitalist claims into a farce. Three-quarters—seventy-five percent!—of Americans age 18-25 can't even join the military, because they are overweight, or because they have a criminal record, or because they don't have a high school diploma.

The problem isn't that we have too much free enterprise. It's that we have too little. When economic and political disparities among people grow large, it's a sign that the circle of those who have the skills and resources to pursue their self-interest is too small. The challenge is to find a way to extend capitalism's founding principle to include everyone.

Consider the following analogy. The self-interest that fuels the free-market system is a force of nature, like the sun and rain. For its part, the sun shines at will, oblivious to whether the plants below are hungry for warmth or already parched from the heat. The rain descends, unconcerned about whether floods have already saturated the landscape. In the face of nature's indifference, the challenge of human civilization is to harness the forces of nature for our good, while protecting ourselves from their excesses.

Like the sun and rain, the free market creates economic harvests of almost unimaginable bounty. But also like forces of nature, the free market is indifferent to its effect upon specific individuals, or cities, or even nations. Our challenge is to civilize capitalism—to harness the power of the free market, while coming to the aid of those low and increasingly middle-income people who have been devastated by its excesses.

As it turns out, Adam Smith would agree. In an important new book titled *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life*, Nicholas Phillipson argues persuasively that self-interest is not the sole centerpiece of Smith's economic views. In fact, Smith was an ambivalent champion of the free market. He didn't believe markets always worked at all, much less that they worked perfectly. Nor did he believe that markets could function effectively without government intervention. Perhaps more surprisingly, Smith believed humans were driven by a motivation even more fundamental than self-interest. It was—brace yourself—sympathy.

Adam Smith's first major work, titled *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, explains how we learn the principles of morality. Our moral sentiments develop from the natural curiosity all human beings have about the wellbeing of others. This feeling of mutual sympathy, as Smith calls it, is the basis of all forms of human communication.

The reason we tend to pursue riches and avoid poverty, Smith says, is that our sympathetic imagination leads us to care about what others think of us, as they presumably care about what we think of them. This deep-seated concern for others leads us to embrace what Smith calls the sacred laws of justice, which curb our self-interest when it threatens to damage the common good.

When Jonathan Sacks was Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, he wrote a book titled *The Dignity of Difference*. Its subtitle reads, "How to Avoid the Collapse of Civilization." In it, Sacks writes:

Economic superpowers, seemingly invincible in their time, have a relatively short life-span: Venice in the sixteenth century, the Netherlands in the seventeenth, France in the eighteenth, Britain in the nineteenth and the United States in the twentieth. The great religions, by contrast, survive. Islam is 1,500 years old, Christianity 2,000 and Judaism 4,000... They remind us that civilizations survive not by strength but by how they respond to the weak; not by wealth but by the care they show for the poor; not by power but by their concern for the powerless. The ironic yet utterly

humane lesson of history is that what renders a culture invulnerable is the compassion it shows to the vulnerable. The ultimate value we should be concerned to maximize is human dignity—the dignity of all human beings, equally, as children of the creative, redeeming God.

The moral sentiments upon which our nation is based include a commitment to what's best not only for each of us, but also for everyone else. At its best, capitalism, along with its political counterpart democracy, serves to maximize human dignity by including everyone. To the extent that we honor these fundamental commitments, we remain true to our calling as Americans. When we do not, we dishonor our nation and debase our morality. At its worst, capitalism becomes a deadly and devastating force, like a hurricane or a release of poison gas.

Our role as a religious community is to be the conscience of our nation. We bear witness to our nation's moral aspirations and pass judgment upon our nation's moral failures. The early Christian writer St. Jerome once described conscience as an eagle. I imagine the eagle soaring high above the public square. From that vantage point, an eagle sees the big picture—ends more than means, overall purposes more than specific plans. The role of the religious community is not to chart a path for our nation to follow, but rather to make sure we're headed in the right direction and that we're all moving together.

Our numbers may be few, but our faith is unwavering and our voice is strong. As Margaret Mead once put it, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."