



Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Fall 2007

on the
public interest

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THE TARIFF



WASHINGTON

LINCOLN



THE NAVY

THANKSGIVING - DAY.



THE UNION ALTAR.



TOWN



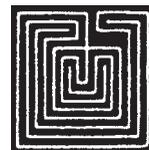
EMANCIPATION



COUNTRY.

AND

McNast



*Inside front cover: A centerfold from Harper's Weekly, engraved by Thomas Nast (1840 – 1902) to mark Thanksgiving Day, November 26, 1863. That year, Thanksgiving fell in the midst of the Civil War, and seven days after Abraham Lincoln had delivered his Gettysburg Address, prophesying a nation born again, “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Nast depicts Lady Liberty kneeling in prayer, surrounded by inset images of a variety of other Americans in prayer, including President Lincoln. See William A. Galston on *An old debate renewed: the politics of the public interest*, pages 10 – 19: “The public interest can help us understand and seek a politics of common purpose . . . It seeks to summon what Abraham Lincoln called ‘the better angels of our nature.’” Image © Son of the South Material.*

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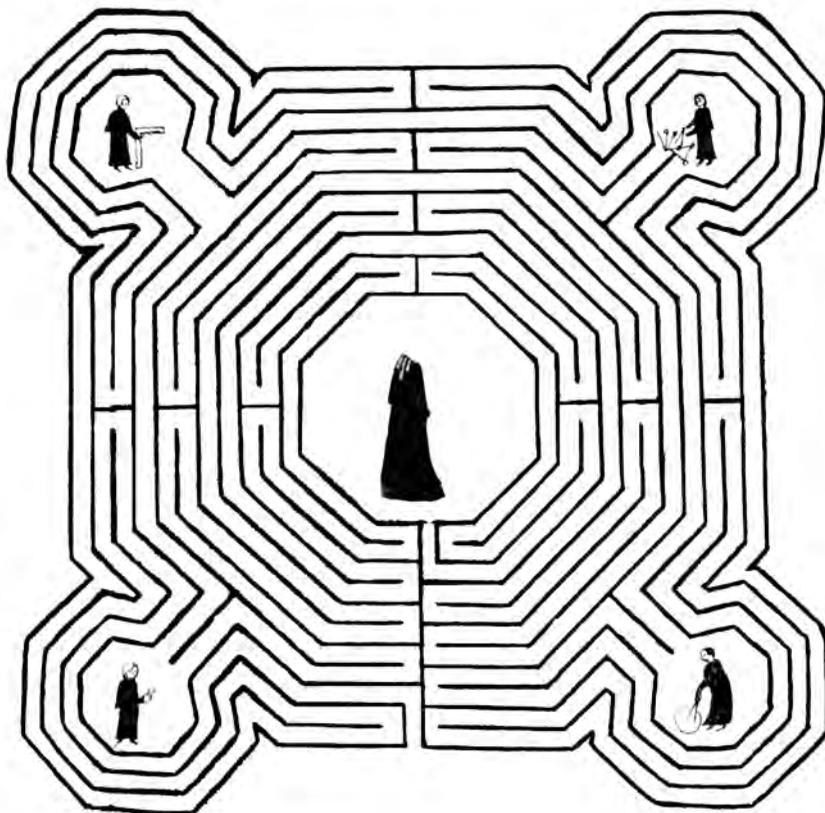
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The pavement labyrinth once in the nave of Reims Cathedral (1240), in a drawing, with figures of the architects, by Jacques Cellier (c. 1550 – 1620).

Dædalus was founded in 1955 and established as a quarterly in 1958. The journal's namesake was renowned in ancient Greece as an inventor, scientist, and unriddler of riddles. Its emblem, a maze seen from above, symbolizes the aspiration of its founders to "lift each of us above his cell in the labyrinth of learning in order that he may see the entire structure as if from above, where each separate part loses its comfortable separateness."

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Dædalus Fall 2007
Issued as Volume 136, Number 4

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*Realizing the public interest: reflections on
an elusive goal*

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Economic policy in the public interest

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Ethical politics: reality or illusion?

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The lure & dangers of extremist rhetoric

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Spring's So Sad, We Want to Know Why

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136 Irving Street, Cambridge MA 02138.
Phone: 617 491 2600. Fax: 617 576 5088.
Email: daedalus@amacad.org.

Library of Congress Catalog No. 12-30299

ISBN 0-87724-066-3

Dædalus publishes by invitation only and assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. The views expressed are those of the author of each article, and not necessarily of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

Dædalus (ISSN 0011-5266; E-ISSN 1548-6192) is published quarterly (winter, spring, summer, fall) by The MIT Press, Cambridge MA 02142, for the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. An electronic full-text version of *Dædalus* is available from The MIT Press. Subscription and address changes should be addressed to MIT Press Journals, 238 Main Street, Suite 500, Cambridge MA 02142. Phone: 617 253 2889; US/Canada 800 207 8354. Fax: 617 577 1545. Email: journals-orders@mit.edu.

Printed in the United States of America by Cadmus Professional Communications, Science Press Division, 300 West Chestnut Street, Ephrata PA 17522.

Postmaster: Send address changes to *Dædalus*, 238 Main Street, Suite 500, Cambridge MA 02142. Periodicals postage paid at Boston MA and at additional mailing offices.

Subscription rates: Electronic only for non-member individuals – \$40; institutions – \$99. Canadians add 6% GST. Print and electronic for nonmember individuals – \$44; institutions – \$110. Canadians add 6% GST. Outside the United States and Canada add \$23 for postage and handling. Prices subject to change without notice.

Institutional subscriptions are on a volume-year basis. All other subscriptions begin with the next available issue.

Single issues: current issues – \$13; back issues for individuals – \$13; back issues for institutions – \$26. Outside the United States and Canada add \$5 per issue for postage and handling. Prices subject to change without notice.

Newsstand distribution by Ingram Periodicals Inc., 18 Ingram Blvd., La Vergne TN 37086. Phone: 800 627 6247.

Claims for missing issues will be honored free of charge if made within three months of the publication date of the issue. Claims may be submitted to journals-claims@mit.edu. Members of the American Academy please direct all questions and claims to daedalus@amacad.org.

Advertising and mailing-list inquiries may be addressed to Marketing Department, MIT Press Journals, 238 Main Street, Suite 500, Cambridge MA 02142. Phone: 617 253 2866. Fax: 617 258 5028. Email: journals-info@mit.edu.

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E. J. Dionne Jr.

Why the public interest matters now

There are cycles in American politics beyond those involving Republicans and Democrats, left and right, progressive and conservative. There are also poles in our history defined by liberty and community, the individual and the collective, the public and the private.

The interplay among these is not always clear. The New Left in the 1960s was both powerfully communitarian and strongly individualistic. One revealing New Left manifesto carried the quintessentially communitarian title, *The Right to Say We*, even as it is hard to find a more radically individualistic movement than the Yippies, who – to the extent that they had a philosophy

at all – found it captured in Abbie Hoffman’s *Steal This Book*.

The Port Huron Statement, the New Left’s classic statement of principles issued in 1962, almost perfectly captured the era’s tension between individualism and community. At one point, it declared: “As a *social* system we seek the establishment of a democracy of *individual* participation, governed by two central aims: that the *individual* share in those *social* decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage *independence* in men and provide the media for their *common* participation.” I have added the emphasis on “individual” and “independence” on the one hand, and “social” and “common” on the other, to suggest how deep the ambivalence ran in those years, even among the authors of a document committed to drawing Americans “out of isolation and into community.”

The New Right was equally ambiguous (or, perhaps, equally confused), encompassing both radical libertarianism and a communitarianism rooted in religion and tradition. The great contribution of William F. Buckley Jr.’s *National Review* to the conservative cause was the invention of ‘fusionism,’ a philosophy that sought to square the circle between a

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love for individual freedom and a Burkean reverence for community norms and traditional restraints. The New Left and the New Right were struggling in their distinctive ways with some of the same contradictions.

But there have been some historical transitions involving rather clear boundaries between one era and the next. The highly individualistic 1920s celebrated private accumulation in economics, private achievement in culture, and private pleasure in individual lives. The capitalist, the jazz musician, and the flapper were all representative of the era. The 1930s and 1940s were decidedly public decades involving collective struggle against the Depression and the rise of Fascism. The era produced labor organizers, the art and writing of the WPA, and the old-fashioned heroes of Frank Capra movies. The transition from the 1920s to the 1930s and 1940s can be seen in another way: Coolidge was as different from FDR as Fitzgerald was from Steinbeck.

Our current moment is more ambiguous. The strong feeling of community and patriotism inspired by the national reaction to the attacks of September 11, 2001, has not fully dissipated. There has been a powerful assertion of state power in pursuit of collective domestic security, while on the right there has been a resurgence of religious communalism. But if the Bush administration has been taken to task for its extravagant confidence in our government's collective capacities in Iraq, it has also faced steady criticism for failing to ask much of citizens on behalf of our common life at a time of national challenge.

As a result of these conflicting trends, the final months of the Bush administration have already led to demands for a new, and more robust, public philosophy. It is possible that the end of the

Bush era could call forth a new libertarian period, as Brink Lindsey argues in his recent book, *The Age of Abundance*, especially in light of the declining confidence in our government's capacities, provoked by its difficulties in waging the war in Iraq and the weakness of its response to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. But there is even more ample evidence of a thirst for a new politics organized around the public interest and the common good.

The intuition that something new is afoot is the inspiration behind the essays commissioned for this collection.

One plausible reading of the last half century (again, Lindsey is helpful on this) would see the nation as having gone through two individualist revolutions. The first, rooted in the 1960s, entailed individualism in the personal sphere: greater freedom on matters related to sexuality, family life, abortion, dress codes, and culture. The second hit with full force in the 1980s and emphasized economic freedom: low taxes, deregulation, heightened competition, and greater inequality. David Brooks's bourgeois bohemians – the Bobos – are the offspring of these twin revolutions.

The Bobos are not going away, and neither are the personal freedoms they honor. But at the end of a long celebration of private pleasure and private striving, there is much evidence of a return to the public realm and a growing concern for public things. For nearly two decades, we have gone through a bumpy and somewhat erratic journey involving a search for the commons and a reengagement with the public interest.

The rise of communitarian thought in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a counter to libertarianism was a sign of what was coming. The work of Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, Amitai Etzioni,

Philip Selznik, and William Galston all pointed toward something novel (or, perhaps, toward the rediscovery of something old). Sandel's formulation, that "when politics goes well, we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone," stands as a classic rebuke to a radically individualistic approach to public life.

In *The Resurgent Liberal*, published in 1989, Robert Reich – later Bill Clinton's Labor Secretary – argued that liberalism had grown weaker because in the post-New Deal period, it based itself on the values of "altruism and conciliation," not on "the stronger precept of social solidarity" that undergirded Roosevelt's experiment. "The liberalism of the New Deal and World War II partook of an inclusive spirit of generosity toward ourselves," Reich wrote. "Society was not seen as composed of *us* and *them*; it was the realm of *we*." A few years earlier, writing in *The Public Interest*, Mark Lilla similarly claimed that the New Deal had been accepted "in no small part because Roosevelt spoke *to* citizens, *about* citizens." It "succeeded in capturing the American imagination because it promised to be a great act of civic inclusion." Lilla entitled his piece, "What is the Civic Interest?"

Such were some of the influences on Clinton. In all the talk about his love for 'triangulation' and his sensitivity to conservative themes, it is sometimes forgotten that Clinton's New Democratic philosophy was in large part a critique of individualism. His trinity of values – "opportunity, responsibility, community" – is only one part libertarian; the latter two words are communitarian in inspiration. Talk about balancing 'rights' and 'responsibilities' trips off politicians' tongues (it certainly did off Clinton's). But the emphasis on responsibility marked a significant correction to the

old individualism that emphasized rights, and only rights.

At the same time, historians and legal theorists like Cass Sunstein and Paul Brest were embracing 'civic republicanism' as an alternative – or supplement – to liberalism. There was the search for 'universalist' values as a counter to 'particularism' and 'multiculturalism' (one thinks of Todd Gitlin's *The Twilight of Common Dreams*). Political science rebelled against 'public choice,' with its emphasis on the individualistic and economic roots of public policy. There was a resurgence in the idea of 'the commonwealth,' advanced in these pages by Gary Hart, and elsewhere by Harry Boyte, who, along with Nancy Kari, also spoke of the value of 'public work,' surely a sister concept to 'the public interest.' Benjamin Barber's concept of 'strong democracy' and his critique of consumerism were part of this trend. So, too, was the renewed interest among Catholic progressives in 'the common good' and 'social reconstruction.'

These developments occurred largely on the left side of politics, but there was a hankering toward mutuality – toward the *public* – on the right as well. As Sandel has pointed out, Ronald Reagan's policies were largely individualistic, particularly in the economic sphere, but "the most resonant part of his political appeal" derived "from his skillful evocation of communal values such as family and neighborhood, religion and patriotism." What set Reagan apart, Sandel has argued, was "his ability to identify with Americans' yearnings for a common life of larger meanings on a smaller, less impersonal scale than that the procedural republic provides."

John McCain's 2000 primary campaign took off in large part because so many citizens were inspired by his repeated assertion that he had "stood up

against the special interests and for the public interest” and his call on citizens “to sacrifice with others for a cause that is greater than self-interest . . . a cause greater than themselves.” One can view ‘compassionate conservatism’ as either a political gimmick or a sincere effort by conservatives to construct a new approach to social policy – or some combination of the two. But it did reflect an awareness on the right (not unlike Buckley’s reach for fusionism) that entrepreneurialism and unbridled individualism were not enough. “The invisible hand works many miracles,” a candidate named George W. Bush said in 1999, “but it cannot touch the human heart.” That same candidate asserted: “We are a nation of rugged individuals. But we are also the country of the second chance, tied together by bonds of friendship and community and solidarity.”

And so our current rendezvous with the public interest and a renewal of the commons has been a long time in the making.

Bush recognized its power before he became president – and then accelerated the demand for it by his own failures. The patriotic spirit bred by 9/11 (it still exists, despite the partisan rancor that has grown around the war in Iraq and the ‘war on terror’) combines with a thirst for public solutions to public problems (health care and pensions, rising inequality and economic insecurity) to endow the idea of ‘the public interest’ with a new energy. Political corruption and government incompetence provide what some might see as an anodyne concept with a populist edge. The public interest looks very attractive indeed when it is contrasted with ‘special interests,’ unjust privilege, and inside dealing.

None of this has rendered the idea uncontroversial, as many of the essays

here – particularly those by Galston and Adam Wolfson – suggest. The libertarian right will always be suspicious that the public interest is simply a high-minded rationalization for the expansion of state power. Many on the left will inevitably see it as a rationalization for acquiescence to the desires of the powerful who disguise their private advantage behind lofty ideals, and demand ‘sacrifice’ from others but not from themselves. Many skeptics of various orientations will continue to see the public interest as an empty phrase invoked cynically to justify any program that any given politician favors in a given week, month, or year. And even those who warm to the concept will acknowledge that believing in it does not necessarily settle any public question.

The issue, always, is: what is the public interest *rightly understood*? Reaching such an understanding requires debate not just about values, but also about facts. It entails arguments about who ‘the public’ is and what its interests really are. It decidedly requires debate over how responsibilities for achieving the public interest are divided between individuals and the community, between the government and private actors.

“In the long run,” James Q. Wilson once declared, “the public interest depends on private virtue.” That is certainly true. But to what extent does the promotion of private virtue depend on public action? Which economic systems, which government policies, which ways of organizing the relationship between work and family life, which approaches to taxation and regulation, which rules and norms create the circumstances in which private virtue, and thus the public interest, can be advanced?

The prospect that our nation might embark on such a debate is bracing. It

is so much more promising than arguments about who will expand or shrink the federal government, about who is tough or soft in foreign affairs, about who is repressive or permissive in their moral attitudes. Paradoxically, the very cynicism that our political system has encouraged is creating a demand for a more exacting standard in public life. There is substantial evidence that the rising generation, while certainly libertarian in many of its social attitudes, places a higher premium than many of their forebears on community service and public engagement. Theirs may be the generation of the public interest.

“The great object of the institution of civil government,” President John Quincy Adams wrote in his First Annual Message in 1825, “is the improvement of the condition of those who are parties to the social compact, and no government can accomplish . . . the lawful ends of its institution but in proportion as it improves the conditions of those over whom it is established.” Adams’s vision was expansive. He urged “laws promoting the improvement of agriculture, commerce and manufactures, the cultivation and encouragement of the mechanic and of the elegant arts, the advancement of literature, and the progress of the sciences, ornamental and profound.” And Adams insisted that to refrain from exercising government’s powers “for the benefit of the people themselves would be to hide in the earth the talent committed to our charge – would be treachery to the most sacred of trusts.”

Adams’s view was controversial at the time – he failed to win reelection – and it is controversial still. Yet he provided the country then, and provides us still, with the right starting point for considering what the public interest is, and how we should pursue it.

William A. Galston

*An old debate renewed:
the politics of the public interest*

Writing in 2006, Michael Tomasky – a well-known liberal intellectual and former editor of *The American Prospect* – created a stir by urging the Democratic Party to embrace a politics of the common good. Decent and forward-looking governance is only possible, he argued, when citizens are called upon to “look beyond their own self-interest and work for a greater common interest”; only then can they believe they are contributing to a project larger than themselves. In Tomasky’s narrative, it is not difficult to understand why Democrats came to replace such a politics, which dominated the New Deal era, with an emphasis on individual and group rights, tolerance, diversity, and social justice. Nor was it inevitable that these two traditions had to clash. But in practice they did, diminishing the capacity of the Democratic Party to speak on behalf of

the nation and opening the door to a generation of conservative dominance.

Tomasky’s article struck a chord. The proliferation of earmarks – narrowly focused line items in the federal budget – suggested that ‘special interests’ were running amok, sealing corrupt bargains with venal legislators at the people’s expense. The common interest or good offered a standard for judging and repudiating these excesses. On a higher plane, a renewed politics of the common good promised an antidote to ever-increasing political discord and polarization. And a new generation of young adults was entering the political arena, disenchanted with the politics their baby-boom parents had bequeathed them but searching nonetheless for a new kind of practical political idealism. (Many of them rallied around Barack Obama, attracted by his invocation of one America as an alternative to warring Red and Blue states.)

In advancing his thesis, Tomasky gestured toward political philosophy: “[T]his idea of citizens sacrificing for and participating in the creation of a common good has a name: civic republicanism.” He cited Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, James Madison’s juxtaposition of self-serving factions to the public good, and Harvard theorist Michael Sandel’s lament for a vanished

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political economy of citizenship, covered over by consumerism and Keynesian economics. Overlooked in this narrative, however, was a more recent episode in American political science – a debate over the ‘public interest’ stretching from the mid-1950s through about 1970 – during which many of these issues were discussed. The vicissitudes of that concept cast a new light on our current situation.

Consider the views of four eminent political scientists, all writing in the early 1960s. After declaring that “there is no public interest theory worthy of the name,” Glendon Schubert rejected the view that there could or should be such a theory. Frank Sorauf dismissed prior discussion of the topic as “semantic chaos” and argued that participants did not even agree on what they were trying to define: “a goal, a process, or a myth.” For their part, Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom contended that the public interest “is usually left totally undefined Often enough a precise examination would show that it can mean nothing more than whatever happens to be the speaker’s own view as to a desirable public policy.” All agreed that there was no remedy: the concept was so vague, so contested, and so mired in subjectivity and partisanship as to admit of no objective and meaningful specification. Gesturing toward Gilbert and Sullivan, Sorauf suggested that the public interest was worthy of inclusion on a list of ambiguous words and phrases that “never would be missed.”

These sentiments are representative of a broad vein of skepticism that had swept over political science. The post-war ‘behavioral revolution’ sought to reconstruct the academic study of politics along the lines of the natural sciences and economics. Facts were one

thing, norms quite another. Scholars could study facts objectively, but only by rigorously excluding norms (including their own ‘biases’) from the sphere of inquiry. The then-popular philosophical doctrine of logical positivism (of which A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth, and Logic* was the canonical text) nourished this view. The positivist creed taught that only two kinds of propositions were meaningful – logical (that is to say, tautological) and empirical. To the extent that morality made claims beyond definitions and observable facts, its assertions were literally meaningless.

Which did not mean random or without significance, however. Logical positivism fit snugly with emotivism, the thesis that morality expresses aspects of individual subjectivity. According to philosopher Wayne Leys, emotivists contended that one component of many words is “an emotion, attitude, or sentiment that . . . has been associated with the words in the experience of the person [using them].” These emotive meanings differ in kind from the “objective or factual meanings on which scientific agreement can be achieved.” The public interest, then, was an empty conceptual vessel into which individuals could pour their own emotional meaning. From this standpoint, ‘X is in the public interest’ is a covert, if often rhetorically effective, way of saying ‘I like X.’

The experience of totalitarianism reinforced this skepticism. Antidemocrats on both the left and the right had appealed to organic conceptions of society. Individuals were parts of a greater whole, and the good of the whole represented a harmony of interests. Conflict within a society was a disease; the cure was a purgative administered by public authority on behalf of the body politic. Understandably, the defenders of liberal democracy reacted by questioning the

possibility of a social whole, however understood. There was, then, no ‘public’ of which an interest could be predicated; to insist otherwise was a dangerous mystification. There were only individuals and aggregations of individuals, each with interests that conflicted with others. Far from being a disease, conflict was inherent in social life. The absence of overt conflict was evidence, not of harmony, but rather of repression.

To invoke the public interest was also to suggest the possibility of concern for society as a whole. Many political scientists doubted that such motivation was a human possibility, and most were sure that it was without force in the real world of politics. Instead, they argued, society was divided into a myriad of interest groups, all jostling for the greatest possible share of advantages, as each defined them. The underlying assumption, or hope, was that interest-group competition was to politics as market competition was to the economy. (This conception raised, without resolving, the problem of specifying the political equivalent of economic efficiency.) In any event, ‘interest-group liberalism’ became the dominant public philosophy.

During this period, not surprisingly, Madison’s *The Federalist*, No. 10, was often cited. It took a leading critic of interest-group liberalism, Theodore Lowi, to point out the crucial bowdlerization: Madison had defined the group (“faction”) as “a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” Modern political science, Lowi observed, had taken over the first part of Madison’s definition while discarding his distinction between group aims and the lasting

interests of the community as a whole. In this way, the interest-group liberals of the 1950s and 1960s blunted the critical moral edge of the Founders’ constitutional realism.

Political practitioners – and academics outside political science – were on the whole far less skeptical. The rise of the administrative state entailed a substantial delegation of decision making to executive-branch bureaucracies and administrative agencies. How were their products – rules and regulations – to be assessed? Inherent in the act of delegation was a gap between the letter of the law and administrative power. Simply put, the drafters of rules and regulations enjoyed substantial discretionary power. A wide range of decisions would be consistent with the underlying law, which therefore could not be used to choose among them.

One way of narrowing the gap was to specify administrative procedures, which came ultimately to include arenas of public participation. If a proposed rule complied with established procedures and was not obviously inconsistent with the underlying statute, it enjoyed presumptive validity. But this procedural norm did not capture what conscientious agency officials understood themselves to be doing when drafting the rules in the first place. While aware that proposed rules would have to withstand scrutiny from stakeholders and the general public, they claimed to be guided by concern for the long-term interests of the community as a whole. Indeed, many enabling statutes mandated such concern by requiring regulators to act “in the public interest.” If the concept was as empty as political scientists said, how were administrators supposed to comply with it?

This problem could be, and was, generalized. Richard Flathman, a philoso-

pher influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, offered a characterization of political life of which normative judgments were an integral part: “Determining justifiable governmental policy in the face of conflict and diversity is central to the political order; it is a problem which is never solved in any final sense but which we are constantly trying to solve . . . We are free to abandon the concept [of the public interest], but if we do so we will simply have to wrestle with the problems under a different heading.”

One of the many ironies of American intellectual history is that logical positivism came to dominate social science at the very moment that philosophers were rejecting it. W. V. Quine’s famous 1951 article, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” turned the tools of analytic philosophy against the foundations of the positivist creed. Wittgenstein’s late masterwork, *Philosophical Investigations*, first published in 1953 after his death, undermined the positivist account of language his early work helped create. The pragmatic tradition of C. S. Peirce and William James continued in the writings of John Dewey and inspired a steady counterpoint to positivist dualisms that flowered in the postanalytic writings of Richard Rorty.

This was the context in which Flathman was able to insist that normative concepts such as the public interest were not only practically necessary but also philosophically possible. Writing in 1966, he inveighed against the view, common among social scientists, that “Logical Positivism reigns supreme in philosophy . . . This belief is mistaken, and to dispel it is important to the general issue of the status of value theory in political science and the social sciences generally [as well as] to the particular problems of theory about the public interest . . .”

Establishing the possibility of a coherent account of the public interest was far from showing that such an account actually existed. In a remarkable effort to clarify the concept, two philosophers – Wayne A. R. Leys and Charner Perry – surveyed seventy-five lawyers, philosophers, and social scientists. They reported a radical heterogeneity of views. Some respondents held that the public interest is purely formal: “Whatever is the object of duly authorized, governmental action.” Others offered substantive criteria: variously, the public interest as the outcome of appropriate procedures, as the maximization of individual interests, or as a normative concept of public order not reducible to any aggregation of individual interests.

Summarizing not only the results of the survey but also his own views, Leys wondered why it was necessary to choose among these views. The public interest, he said, might well be multidimensional: governance in the public interest will be motivated by equal concern for the interests of all, respect for fair procedures, and a norm underlying every vision of a good society – namely, aversion to needless conflict. To be sure, these dimensions will not always point in the same direction; in making specific choices, it will often be necessary to strike a balance (or establish priorities) among them, an inherently contestable process. But to say that the public interest, so conceived, cannot resolve all political controversies is not to say that it cannot clarify them and help establish the range of acceptable resolutions.

Nonetheless, each of Leys’s dimensions raises complex problems. Consider what might seem a straightforward idea – the public interest as maximizing the aggregate of individual interests, with the interests of each individual

given equal weight. This idea guided more than 150 years of utilitarian philosophy, not to mention decades of welfare economics. But writing in *NOMOS*, the annual publication of the American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy, Richard Musgrave (a prominent welfare economist) explained its fatal flaw: “Traditionally, economists have tended to answer these problems [of determining solutions that are efficient, and thus in the public interest] by arguments involving interpersonal comparison of utilities. The efficient solution was that which maximizes total utility, where A’s gain in utility exceeds B’s loss . . . [But] the ‘new welfare economics’ . . . has rejected the possibility of interpersonal utility comparisons.” It thus becomes impossible to talk about maximizing utility across a group of individuals.

In place of aggregation, economists have embraced (some would say retreated to) a different conception of efficiency and the public interest – namely, courses of action that make some individuals better off and no one worse off. But this approach is no less flawed. In the first place, few, if any, public actions will ever satisfy this criterion. While it is reasonable to suppose that voluntary contractual arrangements between A and B leave the consenting parties better off, or at least no worse off, it is at best remotely possible that individuals in a society would unanimously consent to a single course of action.

This fact has led some to propose a fallback position: a policy can be considered to be in the public interest if the winners it produces could fully compensate the losers, while still leaving the winners better off than under the status quo ante. (Trade agreements that increase GDP are often justified in this manner.) But the losers are unlikely to derive much satisfaction from hypothet-

ical compensation and will hold out for the real thing if they can.

Suppose they are made whole. This leads to a second objection. As Musgrave himself observes, the criterion presupposes that individuals assess their well-being in absolute terms only and not relative to one another. For if there is a relative component, someone else’s gain may worsen my position by expanding the gap between us. Those who criticize open markets on the ground that they increase domestic inequalities are using a contestable standard. But what is the basis for deeming it more contestable than the alternative, such that the latter represents a more adequate conception of the public interest?

The third objection goes deepest: the no-harm criterion assumes that the status quo is itself morally acceptable. But as the philosopher Virginia Held pointed out in *The Public Interest and Individual Interests* (1970), “If the initial distribution is highly unjust, it may be that one would wish to consider it in the public interest for some, in fact, to lose . . .” A fair comparison between the status quo and alternatives to it cannot begin by awarding current conditions a morally privileged status.

When we turn our attention to Leys’s second dimension of public interest – fair procedures – parallel difficulties emerge. Procedural fairness is an abstract concept that admits of a large (perhaps indefinite) number of specifications, each of which encodes some understanding of the principles and goods at stake. Procedural definitions of the public interest will be sensitive to the specification of procedures – majoritarianism, constitutional democracy, deliberative democracy, even the output of rule-governed bureaucracies. In law and ordinary politics – as well as in theoretical debates about deliberative de-

mocracy, public reason, and expertise – arguments about procedures cannot be disentangled from substantive considerations. And if we try to short-circuit these arguments by stipulating adherence to ‘established’ procedures, we repeat the mistake of privileging the status quo.

This brings us to substantive accounts. In the fall of 1965, Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol launched a quarterly journal, *The Public Interest*. They acknowledged the obvious objections: totalitarians and autocrats had cloaked their abuses in lofty solidaristic language, while prominent social scientists denied both the existence of interests transcending individuals or groups and the motivation to go beyond one’s own interests.

Bell and Kristol were undaunted. At the very least, they argued, the public interest requires policies based on knowledge rather than prefabricated ideological accounts of social reality. And they unabashedly endorsed Walter Lippmann’s definition: “The public interest may be presumed to be what men would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently.” Seeing clearly meant realistically assessing basic facts and structures, undistorted by passion, hope, or preconception. Thinking rationally meant understanding both instrumental relations (if I do X, the likely consequence will be Y) and substantive relations (A is more urgent, or important, than B). Acting disinterestedly meant giving no more weight to one’s own interests (or to the interests of one’s family, tribe, coreligionists, or fellow partisans) than to the interests of others, while acting benevolently meant affirmatively caring about meeting others’ needs and concerns.

Lippmann’s account was not procedural; it was not particularly democratic; it was certainly not pluralistic. It suggested that all right-thinking, rightly motivated individuals (“prudent men”) would converge on roughly the same conclusions as to what the public interest requires. Those who disagreed with the prudent men were confused, either about the human conditions that defined the public interest or about the best means for promoting those conditions. Lippmann tacitly distinguished between true and false understandings of interests, individual and collective. While it is hard to dismiss this distinction altogether, it raised the risk of abusive authority against which antitotalitarian theorists such as Isaiah Berlin were warning.

Lippmann’s thesis glossed over the loose-jointedness of concepts such as rationality. There were two difficulties, reflecting the two senses of the term. In statements of the form ‘X would be in the public interest,’ X usually stands for an action – a proposed policy – rather than an end-state of affairs, and is asserted to be a means to attaining that end. But given the uncertainty of human affairs, equally rational individuals may disagree whether X, as opposed to Y or Z, is the course of action most likely to achieve the desired result. Rational disagreement abounds in the realm of ends as well: even if individuals agree on a catalog of human goods, they may disagree about their relative weight or priority. Still, it cannot be denied that Lippmann was onto something: whatever the public interest may be, the intellectual and moral virtues he enumerated serve as necessary if not sufficient conditions for discerning and promoting it. And if these conditions do not define a unique conception of the public interest, surely they screen out many misguided options

and focus our attention on a limited set of worthier choices.

Still, one might object, if we are going to place the public interest at the center of our social thought, it would be nice to have a clearer picture of what it is. During the 1960s, many thinkers took a run at substantive specificity. In his precociously comprehensive tome, *Political Argument* (1965), Brian Barry defined the public interest as “those interests which people have in common qua members of the public.” This approach has a venerable history. Thomas Hobbes famously wrote in *Leviathan* that “so long as a man is in the condition of mere nature, which is a condition of war, private appetite is the measure of good and evil: and consequently all men agree on this, that peace is good, and therefore also the way or means of peace” This hard-edged account of common interests is a bit parsimonious for modern tastes. Edgar Bodenheimer, a thoughtful professor of law, spoke for many others in proposing a fuller conception of common interests as “a well-ordered and productive community in which everybody has an opportunity to develop his capabilities to the fullest.” Unpacking this terse definition, we find the following elements: social peace, the rule of law, a productive economy in which the means of self-development are widely shared, and the liberty needed to develop individual capabilities in one’s own way.

Citizens in liberal democratic societies were (and are) likely to agree. But Bodenheimer went on to argue that human beings everywhere were converging on his view. Whatever may have been the case in 1962, it is now harder to argue that Bodenheimer’s irenic and secular account captures universal human aspirations. We may be forced to conclude that the content of the public interest varies, essentially rather than accidental-

ly, among political communities, and among cultural and religious constellations as well. But even if the public interest lacks the universality and bindingness that are thought to characterize human rights, it may nonetheless remain a meaningful and useful standard for public life.

In the years after 1970, discussion of the public interest subsided. Within academia, doubts rose about the possibility of the meaningful aggregation of individual interests. Utilitarianism, which for decades had been a philosophical default position, lost credibility. Meanwhile, theorists such as Kenneth Arrow questioned the cogency of utilitarianism’s longtime political analogue – majoritarian voting. Under many circumstances, it turned out, there simply was no stable or preferred majority; winners were determined by voting rules and procedures rather than individual preferences. Defiance to public majorities was at least plausible. But was it even possible to attach moral meaning to decisions of the House Rules Committee?

Nor was it clear that the public interest deserved a privileged position as the polestar of political morality. In an influential 1958 article, C. W. Cassinelli stated, “The public interest . . . is taken to comprise the ultimate ethical goal of political relationships, and institutions and practices are to be judged desirable or undesirable to the extent that they contribute to or detract from the realization of the public interest.” Indeed, he continued, “that the concept has this particular value connotation is well enough understood, and few problems arise at this level.” But thirteen years later, at the beginning of his magnum opus, John Rawls declared with equal certainty: “Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of

thought. A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust." Many philosophers who disagreed with Rawls about the content of justice agreed with him about its primacy.

This shift reflected broader currents in American society. Many critics came to believe that a focus on the public interest – whatever one meant by that – would perpetuate our nation's oppression of overlooked minorities. Standards such as equality and individual rights seemed better suited to articulate outrage and prompt rectification. And while the public interest was something the holders of power served (or failed to serve), dissenters could demand equality, or rights, or justice for themselves and work actively to obtain them. These standards were empowering, while the public interest appeared at best elitist and remote.

And not without reason. The public interest was linked, historically and conceptually, to the administrative state, which as the home of 'establishment liberalism' came under attack from both the left and the right. The New Left argued passionately against bureaucracy and for participatory democracy. And if that dream was unattainable, then second-best was the proliferation of programs not only targeted toward, but also controlled by, different groups. Anything, it seemed, was better than rule by bureaucrats.

Nonparticipation was not the only objection to the administrative state. Bureaucracy embodies not only structure and hierarchy but also a drive for objectivity – the restriction of arbitrary discretionary power in favor of rules with clear empirical standards of compliance.

But among activists and left-leaning intellectuals, the suspicion spread that whatever their content, unitary standards always repressed diversity and that objectivity was nothing more than the subjectivity of the powerful. In reality, they argued, there was an indefinite number of possible perspectives, none of which could rightly claim all-things-considered priority over the others. But because the perspectives of the powerful had dominated politics for so long, it was high time to listen to those of the subordinated. The point was not whether doing so would serve the public interest, the cogency of which perspectival pluralism called into question, but whether the voiceless would at long last be heard.

Arguments of this sort set off a clamorous debate that reshaped American politics for a generation. But there are signs that this long cycle is coming to an end and that there may be renewed appetite for a politics of common purpose. It is in this context that the public interest, along with allied ideas such as the common good, may well receive a new hearing. This opportunity poses a challenge: Is it possible to learn from past difficulties and frame a conception of the public interest that is both defensible and useful?

Perhaps experience can lead us to agree on some orienting propositions:

1. The public interest points us toward features of a specific, demarcated ensemble of individuals, not to global humanity as a whole.
2. That ensemble is not just an aggregation of individuals. Rather, a public is constituted (sometimes tacitly) through a particular political form that rests on specific assumptions and pursues certain ends rather than others. The public interest derives content, at

- least in part, in reference to those assumptions and ends, from which it follows that the substance of the public interest may differ from community to community.
3. The term 'public' refers not only to a formed group of individuals, but also to the dimension of their lives in which they relate to and affect one another to a significant degree. There are aspects of life, often called 'private,' that lie outside the zone in which considerations of the public interest apply. The manner in which the public is constituted helps locate the perimeter of that zone.
 4. The 'public interest' typically denotes some broad advantage of the community considered internally. We use a different location – the 'national interest' – to denote the broad advantage of the community in its external circumstances.
 5. Human beings cannot live alone and can only live together by attending to, and to some extent accommodating, the interests of others. A stable and peaceful society, and the means to it, is therefore a part of the public interest. These means will typically include institutions and decision-rules recognized as legitimate, an ensemble of shared beliefs and traits of character, and bonds of truce and confidence among members of the community.
 6. While we cannot determine the public interest through an aggregative calculus, we can certainly say that searching for the public interest requires us to consider the interests of all, not just a part, even if the part constitutes the majority of the community.
 7. The public interest has a temporal dimension that views the political com-

munity as an association intended to persist across generations. It is in that spirit that the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution speaks of extending the blessings of liberty beyond the founding generation to "our posterity." *Après nous le deluge* is in principle inconsistent with the public interest.

8. We typically invoke the public interest as a norm when binding, authoritative action is at stake: a proposed government policy promotes, or fails to promote, the public interest. But we can also judge the acts of other influential social agents – such as foundations, corporations, and unions – against this standard.
9. We are especially inclined to invoke the public interest as a critical norm when we see narrow groups (the 'special interests') pursuing their own advantage without concern for the rest of the community. But this opposition between the part and the whole is not a comprehensive template, because it is possible that the actions of even an overwhelming majority can be inconsistent with the public interest.

There is no guarantee that reflection guided by these propositions will always – or usually – point to a single clearly preferable course of action. Experience suggests that when multiple important public goods are at stake, reasonable and well-informed individuals will disagree about their relative priority or weight, and also about the most effective and efficient means for promoting them. Like other high-order norms, the public interest cannot wholly overcome the uncertainties of deliberating in the real world.

Nor is there reason to believe that the public interest constitutes the single highest ethical standard of public life.

Not that any other norm does either. We will often be challenged to choose among, or balance, competing norms with moral weight: rights, liberty, equality, justice, and the public interest, among others. We may, if we choose, obscure these tensions through definitional fiat, for example, by denying that any action that violates individual rights or contradicts justice can be considered consistent with the public interest. But whatever we say, the same hard choices will remain.

None of this means that the concept of the public interest is either vacuous or useless. Like the common good, it has a critical edge and rhetorical force. It does not require us to ignore our individual interests, but it invites us to refine and pursue them in a larger context – a social world in which others have claims different from, but no less weighty than, our own. It seeks to summon what Abraham Lincoln called the “better angels of our nature.”

While the public interest points toward better political practice, by itself it can neither define nor achieve it. Like the common good, the public interest can help us understand and seek a politics of common purpose. But it can be useful only if those who invoke it do so with a clear sense of its limitations when applied in practice, and with the frank acknowledgement that no normative category can overcome the empirical uncertainties and moral risks of acting in the real world. It is always right to ask how the public interest may be promoted. But that is not a question that social scientists or philosophers or theologians can answer. The answer is worked out in the thrust and parry of political competition. Not better theory, but rather better practice, is the remedy for the ills that befall the body politic.

Adam Wolfson

Public interest lost?

When the editors of *Dædalus* invited me, along with several others, to write an essay on the subject of the public interest, I will admit I had some qualms. For many years I edited a journal with Nathan Glazer and Irving Kristol by that very name, and so it was not wholly unfamiliar terrain. Yet what would be the result, I wondered, of asking intellectuals, of all people, to write on the subject – and in particular of asking them whether the thing even exists? Was that not inviting the fox to guard the henhouse? To the average American the idea of the public interest is, I suspect, perfectly sensible; and I also sus-

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pect that without such a notion politicians and government officials would find it difficult to perform their jobs. But what could the public interest possibly mean to an intellectual? If he even bothers to think about the idea it is probably to debunk it. What good would come from only more such debunking? Perhaps, though, I am being unfair to my fellow intellectuals. We live, after all, in uncertain and perilous times, times in which older, long-forgotten ideals may once again seem pressingly relevant. And so perhaps the editors of *Dædalus* were right to call for a reconsideration of this invaluable ideal.

However that may be, we need to begin from where we left off. The public interest as an ideal last received a full airing among scholars in the 1950s and 1960s. I will turn my attention first to this earlier discussion: I will try to capture the flavor of this debate while suggesting what may have gone wrong. It will be the burden of my argument that for all the rigor of their analysis, intellectuals are in fact ill-equipped to understand the public interest – in contrast to America's leading statesmen who live and breathe it.

Thus I will next cast my eye further back in time to consider the reflections of James Madison and Abraham Lincoln

on the public interest. The question of the public interest in America surely begins in some sense with Madison's formulation of it; but notwithstanding the vaunted reputation of his analysis as presented in *The Federalist*, No. 10, Madison arguably failed to offer an adequate conception, which is why I will turn next to Abraham Lincoln. It seems to me that Lincoln provided the Archimedean point for all thinking about the public interest in America, and that our current notions of it pale beside his more robust understanding.

When the subject of the public interest last received the close scrutiny of our intellectuals, in the 1950s and 1960s, it did not fare so well. Many of the leading lights of the day weighed in on the question, including Harold Lasswell, Herbert Storing, Brian Barry, Anthony Downs, Charles Frankel, James Buchanan, Gordon Tullock, Edward Banfield, and Robert Dahl. Numerous scholarly books were published on the subject, under such titles as *The Public Interest and Individual Interests* (Virginia Held), *The Public Interest: A Critique of the Theory of a Political Concept* (Glendon Schubert), *The Public Interest: An Essay Concerning the Normative Discourse of Politics* (Richard Flathman), and *Politics and the Public Interest in the Seventeenth Century* (John A. W. Gunn). The subject also became the focus of collaborative scholarly efforts. In 1959 the philosophers Wayne A. R. Leys and Charner Perry, after receiving written input from, among others, Horace Kallen, Richard McKeon, Joseph Cropsey, Peter Drucker, and Frank Knight, put together a scholarly monograph, titled *Philosophy and the Public Interest*, that sought to clarify the concept. A few years later, *NOMOS*, edited by Carl J. Friedrich, dedicated a volume of essays to the meaning of the public interest.

What especially preoccupied the scholars of this era was the question of definition: how to demarcate and classify the various theories of the public interest. These various definitions need not detain us here except to take note of how schematic and abstract many of them were. Edward Banfield came up with five differing conceptions – two unitary ones (“organismic” and “communitarian”) and three individualistic ones (“utilitarian,” “quasi-utilitarian,” and “qualified individualistic”)¹; Frank Sorauf also came up with five – “commonly-held value,” “the wise or superior interest,” “moral imperative,” “a balance of interest,” and “undefined”²; Glendon Schubert with three – “rationalist,” “idealist,” and “realist”³; and Virginia Held with three as well – “preponderance theories,” “common interest theories,” and “unitary conceptions.”⁴

Beyond the attempt at classification, the intellectuals of these decades grappled with the more fundamental question of whether such a thing as the public interest even existed. On this question both sides were argued, but looking back it does seem that the predominant

1 Edward Banfield, “Supplement: Note on Conceptual Scheme,” in Martin Meyerson and Edward C. Banfield, *Politics, Planning and the Public Interest: The Case of Public Housing in Chicago* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1955), 322 – 329.

2 Frank J. Sorauf, “The Public Interest Reconsidered,” *The Journal of Politics* 19 (4) (November 1957): 618 – 624.

3 Glendon Schubert, “Is There A Public Interest?” in *NOMOS V: The Public Interest*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich (New York: Atherton Press, 1962).

4 Virginia Held, *The Public Interest and Individual Interests* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1970).

view was that the public interest was at most a noble lie, one that was, however, no longer needed. Some of a more skeptical bent found the problem to be in the fact that the public interest could not be known; others in that it could be known to be a sham. Anthony Downs seemed to speak for many when he wrote in 1962 that “it soon becomes apparent that no general agreement exists about whether the term has any meaning at all, or, if it has, what the meaning is, which specific actions are in the public interest and which are not, and how to distinguish between them.”⁵ Or, as Robert Dahl wrote in a letter to Leys and Perry in the preparation of their monograph: “There is little philosophical mileage to be gained from using the term at all.”⁶ The assessment of Frank Sorauf seemed to capture the general tenor of sentiment: “The term is too burdened with multiple meanings for valuable use as a tool of political analysis,” and is anyway nothing but a “myth.”⁷

Certainly, there is a place for such theorizing and questioning; too often, however, the prevailing analysis seemed unfettered from the reality of political life at it is in fact lived. Why had the idea of the public interest become so opaque, even nonsensical, to mid-twentieth-century intellectuals? Why had it become so easy for them to conceive of self-interest or the interest of groups (“interest group theory”), but not the interest of the whole (however conceived)? Part

of the answer is to be found in the new intellectual currents of the day, from behavioralism in political science, to the fact/value distinction in sociology, to value relativism in political philosophy.

Another more prosaic part is to be found in the participants in this earlier discussion. They were almost exclusively scholars, in particular professional philosophers and social scientists; thus if it was an analytically rigorous discussion, it was also an oddly parochial one. Philosophical inquiries into the meaning of the public interest can be helpful, even necessary, but it is also the case that academics may not be in the best position to handle this question. Academics are – and now I will paint in admittedly overly broad strokes – more removed from the public’s business than most other Americans, spending the bulk of their time in the quiet of their studies writing books for their fellow academics. To the extent that academics interact with their fellow Americans it is in the college lecture hall – where they mingle with teenagers mainly (hardly a representative sample of the public). Few academics spend much if any time in government. The academic aspires to the virtues of the critic or gadfly, less so those of the citizen. We need our critics and gadflies, to be sure, but one can see how the modern intellectual’s alienation from public life may in some respects taint his view of the public interest.

If we wish to reopen the question of the public interest, therefore, we face a number of obstacles. We would have to begin by confronting and overcoming the philosophic developments that stymied interlocutors in the 1950s and 1960s; it is worth noting that these developments have become with the passage of time only more firmly entrenched in the academy. Meanwhile, other more recent intellectual trends,

5 As quoted by Held, *The Public Interest and Individual Interests*, 2.

6 As quoted in Wayne A. R. Leys and Charner M. Perry, *Philosophy and the Public Interest* (Chicago: Committee to Advance Original Work in Philosophy, 1959), 17.

7 Sorauf, “The Public Interest Reconsidered,” 624, 638.

such as postmodernism and multiculturalism, have succeeded in making the notion of the public interest seem, if anything, even more quixotic. What can be done on this score is not so clear.

However, our second obstacle, parochialism, may be more readily surmounted, simply by widening the discussion beyond the academy. We might begin, for example, by looking to those for whom the public interest is not some hoary concept but their very lifeblood – namely, among those who on a regular basis take up the public’s business. Unlike academics, America’s public servants and statesmen actually live and work in the public realm, and so they are more likely to have thought about the public interest and to have at least an intuitive sense for what it may mean. Now, not each and every bureaucrat and congressman has pondered the meaning of the public interest in any great detail, and it is certainly the case that self-interest and hypocrisy often color their understandings of the public interest. The politician’s hypocrisy, however, is much less of a threat to the public interest than is the academic’s debunking skepticism. The politician in his hypocrisy at least acknowledges the authority of the public interest, while the skeptical intellectual, consciously or not, seeks to dethrone it.

An additional consideration is to be kept in mind: America has been graced through much of its history with a number of genuinely thoughtful, even philosophic-minded politicians. In our own day the names of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Ronald Reagan, and Franklin Roosevelt come to mind; pushing further back one thinks of Woodrow Wilson, Teddy Roosevelt, and Henry Cabot Lodge, or further still, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and John Quincy Adams, not to mention the Founders. In the writings and addresses of such leaders

one can see them making an effort to understand the public interest, and in their policies and programs an effort to bring it into being.

Of this class of exceptional statesmen perhaps none stand out in clarity of thought as much as James Madison and Abraham Lincoln. Both leaders thought deeply about the public interest, and importantly, they did so in the context of America’s two greatest crises, crises that would have destroyed the country in its infancy – namely, the Constitutional Crisis of the 1780s and the Civil War. These were, in the most fundamental sense, debates over the meaning of the public interest. And what is especially useful for our purposes is the way in which Lincoln entered into a dialogue, as it were, with Madison, attempting to correct what he viewed to be Madison’s faulty understanding of the public interest.

Madison’s *The Federalist*, No. 10, is the locus classicus for all thinking about the public interest in America. This short essay stands out as America’s greatest contribution in political theory, and it has by now received more commentary and analysis than perhaps any other piece of political writing by an American. I can hardly add to this great body of scholarly work. Instead, I propose to look at it strictly for the light it sheds on the problem of the public interest.

Madison had a mind ever alert to theoretical ambiguities and political conundrums. He was not one to hide his head in the sand. Where lesser politicians might be slow to see a problem, which would come back to haunt them, and where still other politicians might claim to have solved the problem, when in fact they had merely found a Band-Aid, Madison never sought the easy way out. He always followed an argument, no matter how intricate, and always wrestled with

a political problem, no matter how apparently irresolvable, to the end. The public interest was one such problem for Madison, a problem that could be neither ignored nor wished away.

What drives Madison's analysis in *The Federalist* is his effort to reconcile two notions of the public interest – one of a more ancient pedigree and the other more decidedly modern. In a quasi-classical spirit, Madison argues in *The Federalist*, No. 45, that “the public good, the real welfare of the great body of the people, is the supreme object to be pursued; and that no form of government whatever has any other value than as it may be fitted for the attainment of this object.”⁸ Madison uses such holistic, almost communitarian, terms throughout *The Federalist*, as when he appeals to “the essential interests of the whole” or “the comprehensive and permanent interest of the State” – or when he speaks of “the happiness of society” as government's true end.⁹ “A good government implies,” Madison states emphatically in *The Federalist*, No. 62, “fidelity to the object of government, which is the happiness of the people.”¹⁰

Madison was thus no blind partisan of democracy or republicanism, however either is defined; in Madison's view, we are to judge a government not so much by its form but according to whether it secures the public good – the public's true happiness. Madison uses, it is also worth noting, the older terminology of the public *good*, as opposed to the public *interest*. Government is not simply about

securing individual rights and interests but some more substantial and transcendent good.

At the same time, as even a cursory reading of *The Federalist*, No. 10, shows, Madison cleaved to the more modern, Lockean notion of the public interest, one in which the protection of private property looms large indeed. “Government has no other end but the preservation of Property,” Locke asserts categorically in the *Second Treatise*.¹¹ Madison, as did many of America's Founders, shared this view of government's purposes. “Government is instituted to protect property of every sort,” Madison wrote on another occasion.¹² The Declaration of Independence itself declares, somewhat more eloquently than did Locke, that we Americans “hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” and “that to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men.”

All of this is familiar enough, but in *The Federalist*, No. 10, Madison draws our attention to the deeper source of the right to property and what this right implies. As Madison puts it: “The rights of property originate” from “the diversity in the faculties of men.” In other words, something stands behind the right to property, namely, “diversity in the faculties of men.” And thus, as seen through Madison's eyes, when Locke declared that “Government has no oth-

8 *The Federalist*, No. 45, in Clinton Rossiter, ed., *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Mentor, 1999), 257.

9 *Ibid.*, 247, 264, 247.

10 *The Federalist*, No. 62, in *ibid.*, 348.

11 John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 329.

12 James Madison, “Property,” in *The Founders' Constitution*, ed. Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), I:598.

er end but the preservation of Property,” he necessarily meant that government has the duty to protect more than mere property; it has, putting Locke and Madison together, ‘no other end but the preservation of the diversity in the faculties of men.’ Or to use Madison’s actual words in *The Federalist*, No. 10, “The protection of these faculties is *the first object of government*” (emphasis added).¹³

In framing the matter this way, Madison came up against a great difficulty in how to think about the public interest, one that he did not attempt to finesse: he espoused two different, even colliding, understandings of the ends of government. On the one hand, government’s “supreme object” is the public good; on the other hand, government’s “first object” is the protection of the diversity of faculties. Well, we might ask Madison, which is it? And can these two different ends, the public good and private rights, always be reconciled? Can we really protect, without one giving way to the other, both the happiness of the whole people *and* the happiness of each individual as expressed in their unequal capacities for amassing wealth? Or will these two ends in some instances be in tension, if not open conflict?

A lesser mind might have denied that any problem existed. But such was not Madison’s way. Instead, he faces squarely up to the problem, stating unambiguously that, yes, it is indeed the case that the property right foments faction: “From the protection of different and unequal faculties of acquiring property, the possession of different degrees and kinds of property immediately results; *and from the influence of these on the sentiments and views of the respective proprietors ensues a division of the society into different*

interests and parties” (emphasis added).¹⁴ It is precisely the government’s sanctioning of the property right that leads to different interests and eventually to what Madison describes as “the violence of faction” – out of which grows in turn “instability, injustice, and confusion.”¹⁵ The end point is the eclipse of the public interest followed by the destruction of popular government.

Madison states in *The Federalist*, No. 10, that it is his aim to solve this problem, to square the circle, as it were, and in such a way that it will be possible “to secure the public good and private rights . . . and at the same time to preserve the spirit and form of popular government.”¹⁶ The solution, he believed, is to be found not in a religious discipline of self-sacrifice, nor in public and private virtue, at least for the most part, but instead in such institutional devices as representation and the separation of powers, as well as, most famously, the extended sphere of the Union.

Did the solution work? Did Madison’s auxiliary precautions enable the country to protect the property right and at no expense to the people’s welfare? It is not my aim to consider in any detail his solution, which is known well enough and has received countless commentaries, nor is it my aim to render judgment about whether Madison succeeded. There can be honest disagreement about the theoretical plausibility as well as the relative historical success of Madison’s project. Instead, I would like to move forward nearly seventy-five years to examine how Abraham Lincoln saw the problem.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁶ Ibid., 48.

¹³ *The Federalist*, No. 10, in Rossiter, ed., *The Federalist Papers*, 46.

Lincoln lived in what we might call a post-Madisonian epoch, in which all of Madison's various devices for containing the mischiefs of faction, such as representation, the separation of powers, and the extended sphere, had seemingly failed. It was a time in which the right to property had become synonymous, at least to some Americans, with the right to own human chattel; a period in which many thought that slavery was in the public interest; an age in which "the extended republic" hoped for by Madison had become the crisis of "the house divided" foretold by Lincoln.

Public deliberation and persuasion could, under the circumstances, accomplish only so much – and as Lincoln said "the war came." Yet Lincoln did not take the necessity of war and the urgency of victory as excuses for avoiding serious reflection on some of the perhaps more obscure but no less important causes of the crisis. Such causes, if not addressed, would continue to haunt even a reunited America. That is, Lincoln 'the war president' did not neglect the responsibilities of statesmanship – in this case, the responsibility of explaining to the American people the deeper sources of the conflict. He did this over the course of his presidency, particularly in such speeches as the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural; but for our purposes I would like to focus on his July 4, 1861, "Message to Congress in Special Session."

What is particularly interesting about this speech is the way in which it addresses many of the same problems Madison had wrestled with – and given the outbreak of hostilities had arguably failed to resolve. Indeed, Lincoln's speech seems almost to take direct aim at the solution offered in *The Federalist*, No. 10. The tenor of the contrast between their views is reflected in the fact

that whereas Madison admonishes in *The Federalist*, No. 51, that men are not angels, Lincoln in his First Inaugural appeals to "the better angels of our nature."

To remind ourselves: For Madison "the first object of government" is the protection of the diversity of faculties of men, which by his own admission led to the problem of ruinous faction and the eventual obliteration of the public good. Lincoln took up a similar constellation of issues in his war message to Congress, but his proposed solution did not involve Madison's auxiliary institutional precautions. Instead, Lincoln sought to contain the problem of faction by replacing what Madison called "the first object of government" with what Lincoln called government's "leading object":

This is essentially a People's contest. On the side of the Union, it is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men – to lift artificial weights from all shoulders – to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all – to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life. Yielding to partial, and temporary departures, from necessity, this is the leading object of the government for whose existence we contend.¹⁷

For Lincoln the leading object of government is not the protection of men's unequal faculties for acquiring property, which, as Madison himself acknowledged, creates different interests, contending parties, a factious spirit – and the snuffing out of any sense of the public good. It is instead to elevate the condition of all men. The property right,

17 Abraham Lincoln, *Selected Speeches and Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 313.

with its basis in human nature, would still be protected in Lincoln's alternative; Lincoln was no proto-Socialist. However, Lincoln grounds democratic government, almost as if in response to Madison, in the positive project of improving the condition of every American, of affording to all "an unfettered start, and a fair chance," rather than the negative one of sanctioning inequality. Such a revised conception of the public interest – one that arguably all Americans of whatever station in life, and whatever their given faculties, could support – was intended to head off the problem of faction that had so confounded Madison. It also no doubt gave birth to what became known as America's civil religion, which would involve not merely a defense of our given empirical interests, but an aspiration toward something more ennobling at the sociological level. In such a Lincolnian conception of the public good, one sees in embryo not only the argument against slavery but also for a more active role for government in the maintenance and promotion of equal rights – of "a fair chance" – for all.

Lincoln's more capacious, democratic, and forward-looking understanding of the public interest would not eliminate the problem of faction, which had so bedeviled Madison; but Lincoln's view, once firmly rooted in American public opinion, may have served historically to dampen the formation of rival ideological parties, parties that would have irreconcilably and violently disagreed on the very definition of the public interest. It may not be a stretch to suggest that Lincoln's reformulation made possible the liberal consensus in America so remarked upon by twentieth-century political scientists.

We can dig a bit deeper still into Lincoln's understanding of the public inter-

est. In the passage immediately preceding the one quoted above, Lincoln invites us to make a comparison of another sort. He points out that the states of the Confederacy had designed new declarations of independence. Absent from these, he notes, are "the rights of men and the authority of the people." In their declarations of independence there is no mention, as in the original, of the laws of nature and of nature's God, nor of human equality. And just as disturbing, Lincoln observes, is the Confederacy's rewriting of the U.S. Constitution's Preamble. I will quote the two preambles side by side, first the original and then the Confederacy's, so as to make Lincoln's concerns absolutely clear.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

We, the people of the Confederate States, each State acting in its sovereign and independent character, in order to form a permanent federal government, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity invoking the favor and guidance of Almighty God do ordain and establish this Constitution for the Confederate States of America.

Gone from the latter, Lincoln observed, is the authority of the American people. Gone as well is the aspiration to provide for "the common defense" and to promote "the general Welfare." And the Confederate constitution not only deletes but adds something: having rejected the American people and the laws

of nature as its sources of authority, it looks elsewhere, invoking instead “the favor and guidance of Almighty God.” (It is worth noting that an effort was underway in the North as well to acknowledge in the Constitution’s Preamble the biblical God as the source of political authority.) In these dueling preambles, we can see that Lincoln’s Civil War was over more than that geographical entity known as the Union; it was to renew and reinvigorate the ideal of the public interest as embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Lincoln’s war was over what it means to be an American.

Today Lincoln is honored with a monument, a temple almost, on the Mall in Washington, D.C., while Jefferson Davis is all but forgotten. And yet, one wonders, the Confederacy’s cause is dead, but perhaps not its pinched and hidebound spirit. For in many ways the Confederate preamble is more congenial to modern sensibilities than is the Preamble defended by Lincoln.

I would observe, in passing, that the Preamble’s invocation of “the common defense” seems just as remote to many of America’s political and cultural elites now as it did to the drafters of the Confederate constitution who had it deleted. We are today, as in Lincoln’s time, two (or more) nations in possession of radically differing views of the common defense. There is at present no bipartisan understanding in defense and foreign policy on how to prevail in our post-9/11 world. National security – which by necessity has to be the primary, most elemental responsibility of any political community – has become, in modern-day America, as contested and unsettled as the public interest.

The public interest itself has few defenders today, whether among liberal or

conservative intellectuals. Nowadays, it seems, we are all Confederates. Conservatives and liberals, both taking pride in their ‘realism,’ argue that the notion of the public interest is nothing but a figment – conservatives in the name of the rights of the individual, and liberals in the name of the rights of the group. For conservatives, the rights of the individual trump all; for liberals, it is the rights of the group. A rigid individualism, on the one hand, and an ideological multiculturalism, on the other, have hollowed out the public good.

In this sense, it is worth noting, too, that both Left and Right are closer to a one-dimensional, deformed Madisonianism than to Lincoln’s view. Conservatives admire Madison for his categorical defense of the property right, overlooking his concern for the general welfare, while liberals look to him as the founder of the school of pluralism (and thus, mistakenly, as a distant forebearer of the multicultural ideal). These theoretical constructs have come to shape opinion and policy, with the result that there is increasingly no ‘us’ in consideration – only individual ‘atoms’ or disparate ‘identity units’ cutting along the lines of race, ethnicity, religion, class, and gender. The public interest ideal, caught as it has become by this pincer movement between individualism and multiculturalism, can no longer inspire a shared sense of purpose. Indeed, the ideal may well disappear entirely in the decades to come, the consequences of which would be the likely demise of liberal governance. For we should consider that it was probably no accident that the Confederacy, in expunging the general welfare and the people’s authority from its national charter, felt the need to inject the Almighty God as a source of its authority and legitimacy. The public was to be supplanted by the Holy. One can

sense in this gesture a deeper relation: namely, that the public interest is to the social contract what God's revelation is to the church. It gives it its form, content, and end, not to mention its sanctity. And thus in abandoning the public interest we risk dissolving the liberal social contract, making way for alternative social and political forms.

I do not wish to conclude on such a pessimistic note, however, for our situation is surely not as dire as was Madison's or Lincoln's. There is something about the public interest, and our quest for it, that prevents it from being simply forgotten. It may be fashionable in certain circles to dismiss the public interest as a meaningless term, a talisman at best, more suited to the age of witch doctors than of modern science or post-modern irony. However, the public interest is no less real than the manifold interest of individuals and groups, and in times of crisis, its necessity will at the very least be felt.

Nathan Glazer

Realizing the public interest: reflections on an elusive goal

One would think that having edited for thirty years a journal titled *The Public Interest*, I should be clear on what the public interest is, how to determine it, and perhaps how to implement it. But after reading hundreds of articles by scholars, journalists, and public figures who have tried, in one area of public policy after another, to define the policies that would truly promote the public interest, I am only left in greater uncertainty as to how to define it.

Nonetheless, the language to express the public interest, as against all the 'special interests,' is available. No one has done it better than Walter Lippman, when he wrote: "The public interest may be presumed to be what men would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently." (Change 'men' to 'men and women' to account for social changes, and changes in rhetoric, since this statement was published in 1955, and written probably earlier than that.)

Or, in a somewhat more expanded effort by Charles Frankel in 1962: "The ideal of the public interest calls on men, despite their egoism, to set their preferences side by side with the preferences of others, and to examine them all with the same disinterestedness and impartiality. It asks them to seek as tolerable and comprehensive a compromise among those interests as is possible. And it reminds them that every decision they make is a limited one, that some interests may have been overlooked, that something better may be possible."¹

This kind of understanding of the public interest is certainly what Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol had in mind when they founded *The Public Interest* in 1963. It was a time when there were high prospects for the social sciences as a guide to policy, domestic and possibly even foreign, and when it was hoped that rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently."

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¹ In the interest of full disclosure, both quotations are in Pendleton Herring's article on "Public Interest" in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* of 1968.

ality and disinterest would play a larger role in politics and policymaking than ideology, passion, individual power-seeking, and narrow self- and group interest would. These permanent features of the human condition could not be transcended, but at least what would be best, for most of us, could be determined and in any situation of conflict set forth as something for which we should aim. In 1971, John Rawls published a more systematic and rigorous effort to define the public interest, with great influence on political philosophy. *A Theory of Justice* provoked hundreds, if not thousands, of articles trying to define the public interest. And other earlier systematic efforts, such as Jeremy Bentham's, were available.

But defining the public interest was not so easy in practice, when one considered specific policies. For example, in the early years of *The Public Interest*, two great urban domestic enterprises were in process, both spurred by national policies providing hundreds of billions of dollars, and both at first glance, or even at second or third, well qualified to be pronounced policies in pursuit of the public interest. One was a project to build the system of high-speed freeways that would provide easier access from one place to another and enable more rapid commuting to jobs in cities and suburbs.

The second was a program to clear away decrepit housing and other facilities in central cities. These buildings had been constructed at a time when housing had to be close to jobs, and when industrial and business enterprises were concentrated in cities to take advantage of rail access. The aim was to replace these obsolete areas, as they were then thought of, with modern urban environments embracing housing, services, work, and cultural and educational facil-

ities. Much of the new building was to provide housing for moderate-income groups. What could be more in the public interest than such enterprises? Moreover, both had wide support in democratically elected legislatures at all levels – national, state, and local – another way of defining the public interest.

But both were also under attack, not least in *The Public Interest*, for their more immediate as well as their secondary and long-range effects. The construction of freeways, when they entered cities, and urban renewal both required the clearance of land. This land often contained houses in which people had lived, perhaps for decades; and long-established businesses that provided livings for families, and jobs and services for nearby dwellers. How were their interests to be taken into account when one pursued the larger public interest?

There were legal and political mechanisms for doing this: money for relocation, the power of eminent domain to condemn and take property, a mechanism for valuing it. Indeed, to demonstrate the rationality and good sense of such projects, techniques for cost-benefit analysis – with which the public authorities could determine when the 'benefits' of a new enterprise exceeded and made worthwhile the 'costs' required, public and private – were coming into effect and being adopted with great enthusiasm (as well as required by federal legislation). It was a heady moment for such analyses, which were growing ever more technically advanced in pace with new computer capabilities. But how could one value the cost of leaving a home to which one had become attached, a neighborhood in which one had grown up, or a business that had sustained one's parents and one's family? Were these losses a matter that had to be

counted when one considered the public interest?

Activists certainly thought so. What they saw was a community disrupted to promote private interests: the interests of construction companies and construction workers to begin with, for they were often most active in pressing for new construction. Then there were the politicians, who wanted to get reelected by pointing to major projects they had sponsored. All this was obvious before one could discern the longer-range effects that served the public interest. Were they then trying to advance 'public' or 'private' interests? The word 'interest' comes in two different meanings, when we contrast 'the public interest' with 'interest groups.' Should we apply the term 'special-interest groups' to the evicted homeowners and business owners, or to those who would profit from the new building the eviction made possible?

This was only the first and the simplest order of conflict over the public interest when one considered urban redevelopment. In the recent *Kelo* case, the Supreme Court held that a homeowner determined not to sell her house had to give it up under eminent domain, so that a profit-making enterprise that needed a large expanse of land could be built: this development was expected to provide more tax revenue for the community and thus further the public interest.

Potential second- and third-order effects of the road-building and urban renewal programs raised more serious, if less immediate, questions about the public interest. The new freeways made it easier to build suburbs farther from the central cities. But the fixed political boundaries of cities made it impossible to tax those who moved outside their borders yet benefited from the freeways in gaining access to housing in the new

communities built on cheaper land far from the city. The freeways also made it easier for businesses to set up their facilities in the new communities. Thus the cities lost population and jobs and tax revenue. The roads that had been built to make it easier to get to the cities were now being used to flee them.

One of the most intriguing problems raised by efforts to determine the value of public policies came when their direct and immediate effects, it was asserted on the basis of more extended analysis, undermined their intended effects. Economic inequality is always a key concern for public policy, and much public policy is enacted to counter it: minimum-wage laws, programs to provide more funds for housing or food for the poor, an Earned Income Tax Credit to supplement the incomes of low wage-earners, a progressive income tax under which the rich pay more and the poor less.

The latter now exists in pallid and hardly evident form, for the arguments as to its benefits in serving those with less income have been greatly undermined, not least by arguments put forth by conservative (but not only conservative) critics that assert that such measures reduce investments in productive job-creating enterprises and thus hurt not only the economy but also the poor. The poor would be aided more by a vibrant and growing economy than by one that, in its efforts to combat inequality, provided fewer jobs and raised unemployment. Note recent articles on France, where a conservative government, elected in part on the basis of such reasoning, has taken power.

The point here is not to argue that these programs intended to reduce inequality have been shown to be counterproductive, and thus not to realize their intentions. That is a matter for debate among economists and other policy

analysts, and the issues are never fully resolved. (Almost the only public policy of the past half-century that seems to have universal approval is the G.I. Bill of Rights.) The point rather is to note that even the policies that seem to have the most direct effect of alleviating the condition of the poor may be shown on analysis to have other outcomes that subvert their original intentions. Of course, those whom these policies harm – the ‘special interests’ – find it in their interest to promote and publicize such analyses. But the analyses themselves are often conducted by serious and impartial economists and other policy analysts.

This is not the end of the chain of argument and analysis, and counterargument and counteranalysis, as one moves into third-order and further effects. France may create fewer jobs and have a less vibrant economy generally than the United States does, but its people seem generally happier with the society they have, with less inequality, more redistribution, and policies that provide wide access to high-quality public services. Are public satisfaction and amenity to be reckoned into the calculation of the public interest? One would think they would have to be.

And we can go beyond the policies and their effects, direct and indirect, on inequality and quality of life to consider some larger, and now more pressing and widely acknowledged, repercussions of the more active and growing economy that American-style policies promote. Is it in the public interest to foster a more vibrant economy – one that consumes more natural resources, changes the climate, and endangers the earth – when one is already sufficiently well-off? Is not the constant preference for an active, growing economy ignoring a central human interest in a sustainable earth? John

Kenneth Galbraith and others thought we were affluent enough forty-five years ago. Even that final test of the public interest (final, that is, in most current thinking), a growing economy, may have to be challenged by a wider view of the public interest – one that might be called the human interest.

These less than systematic considerations on arguments over what serves the public interest raise a number of general problems. The list that follows is hardly complete, nor are all the items on the same plane from the point of view of logic or relationship to the problem of the public interest, but they arise from tussling with concrete policy issues that have engaged us in recent decades. They make the problem of unambiguously defining the public interest a difficult one.

We can characterize the first large problem in determining the public interest in this way: what is ‘the public’ when we consider the public interest? For many issues of public policy, we tend to set the boundary for consideration as that of the nation, the largest political entity that wields effective and dominant power. But the public can be as narrow as the neighborhood that will be affected by the building of a major road, a low-rent housing project, a half-way house for persons released from prison, or a home for mental patients who are being removed from large state institutions, which have everywhere been closed. Can a larger calculation of costs and benefits settle the matter? Perhaps in theory, but certainly not in practice or in local politics.

Today we also have to take into account issues that may be under the control of national entities but transcend national boundaries. These are preeminently the policies contributing to global warming. This is certainly a matter

for the public interest, but the effective 'publics' who determine how the issue is to be governed are national publics, defined by state boundaries. That 'public' is too large for some issues – those neighborhood issues I have referred to, for it may not notice the harm it does in pursuing *its* interests – but too small in considering a worldwide public interest like limiting climate change.

Something like an international public is emerging, as we note when we see some change in President Bush's position on policies to control carbon emission. His shift suggests that the interest of the United States in a strong and growing economy, which led to his initial dismissal of the Kyoto proposals, has been modified, perhaps in part by the growth of what we might call an international public opinion and an international public interest. Other elements, such as his declining political effectiveness, are major contributors to the change.

The issue of a boundary to the public is not often in mind when we speak of the public interest, since effective decision making is taken by national governments for a public within that boundary. But if one does not so bound the reach of the public interest, one may note many issues – determined at the national level – that ideally should take into account their impact beyond the national boundary. At the present writing, we are engaged in a major debate on immigration policy. We consider its effects on us as a nation, within the United States, and the research on these effects concentrates on such matters as immigration's impact on wage levels for the low-income wage-earner, or the dependence of certain businesses and industries on imported immigrant labor.

But our immigration policies also have consequences for our neighbors, preemi-

nently Mexico but also Central America and the Caribbean nations (with lesser effects on other nations), because of their dependence on the United States as a place where their poor and young may find employment and remit earnings to their families in their home countries. If the United States made the cut-off for these wage-earners effective, would that not also affect the internal stability of these nations, and is that not also part of the American public interest?

A second large issue I have raised in these initial considerations is that of how far we should extend our consideration of the consequences of policies affecting the public interest. Here, extended analysis, as I have shown, may contradict the initial intentions and expectations of given policies. This is related to a third issue: how far into the future can we go when we consider the public interest? The policy we choose today may be different if we think about the public interest ten or twenty or thirty years ahead. Our politics, as is well known, are not set up so as to account for long-range interests. We elect our public officials for two or four or six years, and often limit their opportunity to seek reelection.

Not long ago, three widely discussed exhibits on the work of Robert Moses in reshaping the city of New York were on display in various venues in New York. They raised this question: may a policy that we generally think of as not in the public interest be reinterpreted to be in the public interest a few decades down the line?

Robert Moses was indeed a controversial figure. He undoubtedly thought that he was working exclusively in the public interest, and when one contrasts his career with that of public figures today – many of whom seem to take their years in public life as a prelude to money-mak-

ing in post-public life – he does stand out as distinctively indifferent to any personal self-interest. He dealt with projects that cost the equivalent of billions in today's dollars, but left an estate of \$50,000. If one looks at the public works to which he devoted himself – parks and playgrounds and public beaches; swimming pools for the poor; parkways and expressways; middle-class housing projects – one would regard him a major public servant. But Moses was execrated during the last decades of his long career, and the weight of public opinion since then has judged him severely as someone who destroyed much that was valuable in New York City, an arrogant egomaniac whom mass public protest had to stop before he caused greater damage to the public domain.

Yet Moses was regularly appointed to the positions that permitted him to carry out his public works by democratically elected governors and mayors, most of whom are considered in their public lives embodiments of enlightened public service. How could opinion on the work and career of Robert Moses diverge so radically? One reason is the difference in how we evaluate what we have in the present against a perspective that looks further into the future. Here, other issues arise, such as how far we can look into the future, and how we can avoid grave errors in sacrificing a present to a presumed better future.

There is least argument over his work developing parks, playgrounds, beaches, and swimming pools. These were often on undeveloped land or land left over from other projects, and did not require the large-scale uprooting of homes and business that the major road-building and urban renewal projects entailed. In Robert Caro's huge book on Moses, *The Power Broker*, which has been the dominant influence in shaping the public

image of Moses, some of the most powerful and affecting pages describe the building of the Cross-Bronx Expressway and its destruction of working- and lower-middle-class neighborhoods in the Bronx.

In recent years, Jane Jacobs, who has reshaped our thinking about city planning and urban development, has emerged as the foil to Robert Moses. She fought and stopped his plan to run a major freeway across Lower Manhattan, enabling rapid access between New Jersey and Long Island and reducing truck and other traffic on the streets of Lower Manhattan. Its path ran through what were then moribund and low-priced small-scale industrial facilities and businesses. In subsequent years the areas that were to be demolished flourished as Soho and Tribeca, in the very buildings deemed derelict and slated for demolition. Here, the long-range future spoke decisively against Moses: who would exchange Soho and Tribeca and the related areas today for an expressway?

But what do we think today about the large-scale housing developments for the middle class that Moses built under urban renewal, also attacked in his time for uprooting small businesses and homeowners and renters? Today, these developments are seen as one of the few anchors of a lower-middle class and middle class in Manhattan and New York City. When *The Power Broker* was published, in 1974, New York City was going through the worst financial crisis in its history: it was losing population, and it seemed doubtful it would ever recover. Little need then to take much account of Moses's housing developments. But the 1980s saw some progress, the 1990s more, and today the rising costs of land and rent have effectively turned Manhattan, and in increasing

measure the rest of New York City, into places where apparently only the poor, in subsidized housing projects, and the prosperous, in the private market for housing, can live. The middle-income developments built by Moses under urban renewal now provide thousands of apartments for teachers, policemen, firefighters, health workers, and the like. Here, the future has spoken in favor of Moses's vision, though we may still decry the design of these developments, so similar to low-rent housing projects.

There was no way of calculating the verdict of the future, and a rather far future, in the 1950s and 1960s. There is no way of calculating what the future will think of the policies we institute today. To sacrifice the present for the future on a large scale – the policy of Communism in Russia and China – is abhorrent to us. But on a smaller scale we do it every day, when we demolish a neighborhood for a new tax-paying development or a new major road, replacing a modest present with what we conceive of as a larger, or more useful, or more productive, perhaps grander, future.

It is harder to do these days, in part because of our experience with Robert Moses and his equivalents in other cities. We now have a much greater degree of mandated local participation and required environmental impact reports for every large project; we now have specialists who are employed by developers to engage in scores of meetings with communities to ease the way for approvals for every large project, and to overcome the inevitable opposition of those invested in what exists for what will replace it.

All this is for the best. Our democratic processes have been developed and expanded to define the public interest bet-

ter. But when we think of the many great projects of the past, effected in days when these democratic processes hardly existed, we can also regret the limitation we have placed on large thinking, on commitments on a large scale to what we will need, appreciate, or enjoy in the future. When community activists, raising environmental considerations (the breeding environment of a Hudson River fish would be affected), shot down the proposal for a grand new roadway to be built through parks on the west side of Manhattan, Daniel Patrick Moynihan (then a senator from New York, who supported the project along with the then-mayor of New York City and the governor of New York State) mused in public, "How did we ever build the George Washington Bridge?"

We must ask whether we struck the right balance in pursuing the public interest when in the 1960s and 1970s we created the institutions and practices to govern and limit public action. Do we weight the present against a possible future too highly? It is not an easy answer. When we look at the cities of China, we think, they need less Robert Moses and more Jane Jacobs. But in our country today, perhaps certain kinds of public work, in furtherance of the public interest, are too hampered. When the exhibit on the magnificent work of Jane Jacobs opens soon, we may be led to wonder, how under her strictures do we build the grand projects that we may need and that may fulfill our desires for a great city?

Jagdish Bhagwati

Economic policy in the public interest

Economists, whose discipline has always had a strong relationship to moral philosophy (Adam Smith, the author of *The Wealth of Nations*, also wrote the celebrated *Theory of Moral Sentiments*), have always seen their role in society as that of pursuing the public good. They properly see themselves as guardians of the public interest, and to be engaged in public-policy debates against special interests who wish to ‘capture’ policy to advance their narrowly circumscribed, self-serving agendas.

I must note at the outset that as one analyzes the public debates on questions of economic policy, one sees cynical attempts by special interests to gain the higher ground. One might observe wryly that in the battle for public support,

one tries to gain the advantage by claiming that the opponent’s interest is ‘special’ and one’s own is ‘general.’ We have long known that special interests have learned their Orwell well: they understand that words matter in public debates.

Thus, protectionists have typically used the inviting phrase ‘fair trade’ to mask their protectionism.¹ This was true at the end of the nineteenth century when Britain, the long-standing proponent of free trade, was facing the rise of Germany and the United States. As Britain experienced what I have called ‘diminished giant syndrome,’ ‘fair trade’ became a cry of the protectionists, who charged these newly emerged and protectionist trading nations with ‘unfair trade’ and condemned Britain’s free-trade policy as inappropriate. The United States would confront the same syndrome a century later, with the dramatic rise of Japan in the 1980s and the dreaded prospect that the twenty-first century would be Japan’s as the twentieth was America’s and the nineteenth was Britain’s. Exactly as in Britain at the end

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¹ Throughout this essay, I draw on examples from the theory of commercial policy where my scholarly expertise is the greatest. Similar examples can surely be drawn from other areas of economic scholarship and policymaking.

of the nineteenth century, the United States witnessed the growth of demands for 'fair trade,' and charges against Japan that it was a wicked 'unfair trader' that excluded imports and dumped its exports.

The latest proponents of such demands are the AFL-CIO and the New Democrats – and therefore the Old Democrats who must fall in line. They are concerned with competition from the poor countries instead. Desperately seeking ways to protect themselves from such competition, they claim that these poor nations are indulging in 'unfair trade' because they have labor and domestic environmental standards not identical to those in the United States. Raising these standards in the poor countries, in the name of 'fair trade,' is nothing but a form of 'export protectionism': it is aimed at raising the cost of production in these countries and thereby moderating the competition they pose.

These lobbies are equally adept at disguising this protectionist agenda by simultaneously asserting that their demands to have the poor nations raise their labor standards to U.S. levels are inspired by empathy and altruism for the workers in the poor countries – a claim that is belied by reading the campaign speeches of the New Democrats, who always speak instead of the unfairness of losing jobs to rivals with lower standards, i.e., import competition.

Moreover, these lobbies frequently paint economists as venal fronts for 'corporate interests' on issues such as free trade. These lobbies forget John Stuart Mill's observation that no general interest was ever advanced unless someone's special interest was advanced alongside it. In a democratic society, where votes matter, free-traders like myself realize that free trade cannot be advanced by

ideas alone: it is not enough to have the generals; one must also have the troops. Also, if special interests, like corporate interests, happen to see their profit in what one proposes, that does not subtract from the fact that the policy one is advocating is prompted by the public interest.

One lesson for the economists who seek to influence public policy, however, is to ensure that they do not open themselves to the charge that they have been 'bought.' In the 1980s and early 1990s, the years of Japan-bashing in the United States, I was almost alone in defending Japan against exaggerated, hysterical attacks by Detroit and other U.S. producers, and by the media and the politicians. At the time, I was careful not to accept any moneys for even a lecture or a conference paper in Japan. When I went to a conference associated with the Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry (organized by my good friend Professor Ryutaro Komiya, whom I got to know well when he was at Harvard and I was at MIT in 1956 – 1957), we were all offered \$2,000 for our papers. All the Japan-bashers readily accepted the money; I said I would write but not accept the honorarium. So I was given an extra lunch coupon! I used it to eat tempura in the Okura Hotel. Later, I told my friends that I had had \$2,000 tempura in Tokyo. The punch line, however, was that prices in Tokyo were so high, and even more outrageous in the big hotels, that I could very well have had tempura for \$2,000!

For much the same reason, I have refused to consult with multinationals or to sit on their boards of directors. I generally defend multinationals against knee-jerk attacks from agitators who view multinationals and their 'profits' the way moneylenders and 'usury' were regarded in the Middle Ages. Undeniably my refusal to get rich in the way

many economists do today has enabled me to be more credible when I defend corporations against unjustified assaults.

Let me add that corporations are often buying an economist's reputation, not his or her analytical judgments. Their game often is simply to say, at a suitable price, that Professor Jagdish Bhagwati or Professor Paul Krugman or Professor William Baumol is on our side. We would be wise not to yield to such blandishments. We may give our advice anonymously, but to give it with our names attached is to throw our reputation in the face of their opponents and also in the mud. Once, an important beverage company operating in India asked me to calculate the Indian elasticity of demand for canned sodas. It clearly hoped to argue that the elasticity was so high that a reduction in the sales tax on them would raise more, not less, revenue (à la the Laffer curve). This request surprised me – since I am an economist who works with ideas and never crunches numbers – until I realized that they had to know that I was a close friend of the finance minister (now the prime minister). So I replied mischievously: I am afraid I cannot do this until the finance minister changes. Naturally, I never heard from them again.

Economists are also tempted today by large fees that accrue when they testify in court on behalf of corporate clients. Lawyers do this all the time, though outstanding jurists abstain from such practice. Once, I was giving a keynote speech at Yale Law School, when a lawyer teased me with the old chestnut, that where there are six economists there are six opinions (though Keynes had said seven opinions, two being his own). I teased him back from the lectern: That is bad, but with lawyers the situation is worse. Each lawyer has six opinions if he has six clients.

But even when a scrupulous economist avoids these pitfalls, substantive problems still arise in pursuing the public interest. These come from two different directions.

If we are to pursue the public interest by arguing that one policy is preferable over another (say, freer trade over retreat into further protectionism), we need to be able to analyze persuasively how the different policies will work. Then, we must have a criterion by which we choose among these policies, in light of this analysis. Economists call the first 'positive' analysis, and the second 'normative' analysis. If either is defective, the economist's ability to say that a specific policy advances the public interest is compromised.

In truth, even the positive analysis leads often to irreconcilable differences, not just between economists and others but among economists themselves, vexing politicians who would prefer clearer guidance. Prime Minister Robert Peel, who abolished England's Corn Laws in 1846 and introduced free trade to the world for the first time, was clearly converted to free trade by the writings of economists starting with Adam Smith, though the celebrated Chicago economist George Stigler has written unconvincingly that "economists exert a minor and scarcely detectable influence on the societies in which they live If Cobden [who led the anti-Corn Law movement] had spoken only a little Yiddish, and with a stammer, and Peel had been a narrow, stupid man, England would have moved toward free trade in grain as its agricultural classes declined and its manufacturing and commercial classes grew."²

2 George Stigler, *The Economist as Preacher and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 63–64.

But Peel also famously lamented the fact that he often found conflicting analysis of the central questions in what was then called ‘political economy.’ Thus he argued in the Parliament:

Far be it for me to depreciate that noble science which is conversant with the laws that regulate the production of wealth and seeks to make human industry most conducive to human comfort and enjoyment. . . . I find the difficulties [faced by us in accepting their less-than-compelling analysis] greatly increased by the conflict of authorities. . . . The very heads of Colonel Torrens’s chapters are enough to fill with dismay the bewildered inquirer after truth. These are literally these: ‘Erroneous views of Adam Smith respecting the value of Corn’ . . . ‘Errors of Mr. Ricardo and his followers on the subject of rents,’ ‘Error of Mr. Malthus respecting the nature of rent,’ ‘Refutation of the doctrines of Mr. Malthus respecting the wages of labour.’³

Little has changed since then. At the heart of the problem is the fact that not all economists share the same model. A model, whether explicit or implicit, provides the map of how a policy will work. Thus different schools plague macroeconomics: monetarist (Milton Friedman), Keynesian, rational expectations (Robert Lucas), and varying versions of each. But even if we were to agree on a model to look at the world, we can and will disagree on the parameters that feed into the model.

So we can take it for granted that some economists will dissent even in

cases where there is substantial consensus, such as whether free trade is a better policy than protectionism. There is, however, socially useful dissent, and then there is socially unproductive dissent. The case for free trade, and its historical evolution since the time Adam Smith wrote of its virtue over two centuries ago, illustrates this distinction well.

Take first the useful dissent. Since Adam Smith, prominent economists have disputed the merits of free trade. The reason was simple. Put heuristically, the case for free trade depends on our faith in the ability of market prices to reflect social costs. When there are market failures, an empirical issue, the Invisible Hand (which depends on market prices being socially correct guides to efficient allocation of resources) could be pointing in the wrong direction. During the period of massive unemployment after the Great Crash of 1929, (the positive) market wages did not represent the true social cost of labor (which was zero), and Keynes became a famous advocate for protection.

In modern times, since World War II, economists have analyzed imperfections in the labor and other ‘factor’ markets; and my students Paul Krugman and Gene Grossman have likewise examined imperfections in the product markets.⁴

However, in 1963, I restored the case for free trade by arguing that all we needed to do was apply an appropriate policy to remove the market failure. For example, if producers in an indus-

3 Quoted in Douglas Irwin, “Political Economy and Peel’s Repeal of the Corn Laws,” *Economics & Politics* 1 (1) (Spring 1989). Adam Smith was the dominant figure in the new science of political economy (Economics); but David Ricardo enjoys a nearly equal reputation, and Malthus and Torrens were also major writers, active in the debates of their time.

4 In several publications during the last decade, I have reviewed and systematized the repeated episodes over two centuries of theoretical departures from the case for free trade for different types of market failures. The easiest to access is *Free Trade Today* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), based on lectures at the Stockholm School of Economics.

try were polluting without having to pay for the pollution, then their social cost would exceed their private cost. Society would be overproducing in that industry, and free trade might well be harmful relative to protection. But if we introduced a 'polluter pay' tax, we could remove the market failure and go back to free trade. This simple insight transformed the postwar theory of commercial policy, restoring to free trade its pre-eminence and widespread support in the profession.

The few dissenters to free trade today are unlike earlier dissenters. They fall into the category of unproductive dissenters. I suspect that their activities are a response to the perverse incentives that characterize economic dissent. Unlike the political dissenters (such as Vaclav Havel) who typically lived under grueling conditions, today's economic dissenters flourish. The sheer dearth of these dissenters raises their value immensely. The foundations that fund the current pandemic of conferences want the 'opposing' point of view represented. So these dissenters are going to Oslo, Tokyo, Port Alegre, Paris, and other exotic places to attend seminars and conferences where they are welcome simply because economists who espouse their viewpoints are scarce. They also find themselves addressing adoring crowds, such as at the World Social Forum, where passion outweighs intellectual competence in these areas. And if one is a Nobel Laureate, the incentive to behave as an economic dissenter is greater still: after all, if one has the Nobel Prize, why worry about what one's peers think?⁵ Instead, one can cultivate

5 It is reassuring that few Noble Laureates behave like this. The danger with a Nobel Laureate dispensing errors is particularly great when it comes to developing countries. These

a new 'market,' a populist audience, and aspire to join the ranks of Naomi Klein and Arundhati Roy, whose conclusions are more obvious than their arguments. These few dissenters are a nuisance, diverting economists into fighting rubbish within their own ranks. Yet they present no real threat to the ability of the profession to advance the public interest.

Then again, the aging population, and the speed with which science changes, creates intergenerational differences in analysis, as the older scholars find their modes of analysis being replaced by new ones. Several scholars age gracefully. When Paul Samuelson was asked how often science changed, he replied, "With every funeral." But even when they do accept the new gracefully, differences in perception, from the use of 'older' models, carry over into different views of the 'positive' issues at hand. In the recent debate on globalization, some have argued that as economies such as India's and China's grow more like us in their endowments (i.e., develop scientists, engineers, and doctors), the gains from our specialization in skill-intensive products will decline. But we now know, from theoretical work on 'trade in variety' or 'trade in similar products,' that specialization takes place within industries. So as countries grow similar in endowments, trade in similar products breaks out: one can observe this by walking down Madison Avenue and observing the many men's fashion designers, such as Giorgio Armani, Christian Dior, Ken-

countries typically tend to be ascriptive and also do not have the local expertise to challenge erroneous pronouncements and advice. By contrast, in the developed countries, there is a lot of expertise and debate, and there are many Nobel Laureates and also other distinguished scholars, who can counter nonsense propounded by their peers who play to the gallery.

zo, Calvin Klein, and Pierre Cardin, compete and coexist in the same fashion industry while offering the customers much gain. Both my student Robert Feenstra, who is the leading econometrician of trade today and heads the NBER Program on International Trade, and my colleague David Weinstein have estimated these gains from similar products and concluded that they are huge. Once we admit into our thinking a new 'model,' our view of reality changes: in this instance, toward a more benign view of globalization.

In normative analysis, the economics profession runs into difficulties as genuine as the ones that afflict it in positive analysis. Contrary to what public-policy debates might suggest, economists do try to answer the question of how to judge whether a policy is 'better' than another. Suffice it here to indicate some of the ways in which they have grappled with the issue.

Perhaps the most important observation I can make is to indicate how in a multiperson economy one can call a policy better than another. If Robinson Crusoe were to put Man Friday on a boat, leaving us to judge his one-person welfare as total welfare, life would be simple. But as soon as you have two (or more) people in a society, how do we determine if a policy change improves welfare if one person's welfare increases but another's declines?

The typical criterion that economists have settled upon is the Pareto criterion: if the policy change improves Robinson Crusoe's welfare but decreases Man Friday's, the policy change increases overall welfare if Robinson Crusoe can compensate Man Friday and still have enough gravy left over to make himself better off. This sounds great until you realize, as my famous Oxford teacher Ian Little

noted in his pathbreaking work, that this is only a 'possibility' criterion: if Man Friday is left *in reality* with his reduced welfare, few would agree that the welfare of Robinson Crusoe's island society actually improved.

Economists, with increasing sophistication culminating in work such as Samuelson's, have shown that free trade is a Pareto-better policy. But suppose, as we liberalize trade, that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and no actual compensation takes place. Should we call Freer Trade a better policy than increased Protection? If we cannot compensate the losers, then many would reject this conclusion.

So, if positive analysis leads one to argue that trade with poor countries and other forms of economic globalization, such as multinational investment outflow to these countries and inflow of unskilled immigrants from them, is causing the poor to get poorer in the rich countries (Marx's prediction of the immiseration of the proletariat did not materialize in the nineteenth and most of twentieth centuries but may now be striking again with the aid of globalization), and if one thinks that actual compensation to the losers is not feasible because of the decline of the welfare state, then that person would reject freer trade. This may well describe the state of thinking on free trade in the United States today.

But this is as good as the positive analysis of the effects of trade (and immigration and multinational investments). As I have argued in many places,⁶ the assertion by the AFL-CIO, and the New Dem-

6 E.g., chapter 10 of my book, *In Defense of Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); the afterword in the new edition issued in August 2007, which offers more analysis of the issues; and several recent *Financial Times* op-ed articles and letters on U.S. trade policy,

ocrats they support and capture, that globalization is placing the economic pressure on the wages of the unskilled and even the middle class is not tenable. Their policy prescription against free trade, though justified by a normative criterion that many of us share as citizens and economists, is vitiated by erroneous analysis, and thus handicaps, not advances, the public good.

Indeed, there are many other instances in the public-policy domain today where bad analysis married to good normative criteria has created counterproductive results, setting the public interest back instead of advancing it. The renowned philosopher, Peter Singer, wrote a book against globalization, which marries his utilitarian analysis with large amounts of antiglobalization nonsense, marring an otherwise interesting book.⁷ He also recently wrote a *New York Times Magazine* article on foreign aid, which argued that there was a moral case for more foreign aid but betrayed absolutely no awareness of the enormous analytical, empirical, and econometric literature, both recent and from the 1960s through 1980s, on why aid could be unproductive and, more important, counterproductive.⁸ If aid results in less, not more, development, how can one say that aid

is good for the recipients? Or that we *should* give aid, as Singer proposes?

Furthermore, economists must respond to intergenerational income-distribution problems in addition to Robinson Crusoe versus Man Friday problems. A typical question we grapple with is: what is the 'optimal' rate of saving? Now with environmental concerns at the forefront, we must also wonder: what do we owe to future generations? These are income-distribution questions over time, not just within a given society.

There are questions of income distribution over space as well. Immigration is one example. How do we evaluate a freer immigration policy versus a restrictionist one in situations where the immigrants gain but their outmigration harms those left behind (as with some poor countries suffering from 'brain drain')? Should immigrants' welfare be aggregated with that of the countries receiving them or with that of the countries losing them, or with both, or with neither? The sophisticated discussion of these issues is to be found in economists' writings from time to time; but it is virtually lost in the din of heated debates over immigration.

Economists are aware that in discussing public good, they must also allow for what another of my Oxford teachers, Roy Harrod, called 'process utilitarianism.' Often, economists (who are generally utilitarians) will consider a policy to be better because it augments efficiency and therefore the availability of goods and services. But one might object to the process (e.g., markets) by which we arrive at that efficient solution. As Richard Posner once argued,

surge in aid like my colleague Jeffrey Sachs; but that is neither persuasive to scholarly economists nor calculated to advance the public good.

especially "Technology, Not Globalization, is Driving Wages Down," January 4, 2007.

7 His book, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), was reviewed jointly with my book, *Free Trade Today* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002) in *The New York Review of Books*, March 25, 2004.

8 See Peter Singer, "What Should a Billionaire Give – and What Should You?" *New York Times Magazine*, December 17, 2004. The large literature on how aid may have a malign impact, and might even be given with malign intent, is ignored by the proponents of a substantial

a market in baby adoptions would distribute babies efficiently, but most of us would find such a market distasteful. Or should we allow rich people to park in spaces for the handicapped just by buying special permits to do so: should not everyone have to assume the obligation to keep these spaces off-limits to the nonhandicapped? Or should Al Gore be allowed to buy offsets (i.e., finance CO₂-emission reductions) from others when he emits a lot of carbon in his home? It is fine if Al Gore wants to finance CO₂-emission reductions, but it should not be used to justify a lifestyle where he assumes no responsibility to cut down his own emissions.

These issues are very much what we economists deal with as we discuss the public good. Our analysis, and our appreciation of the nuances involved, is much richer than what many critics, who are not familiar with the ways of sophisticated economists and go by what they learned in 101 classes from indifferently written textbooks, assume to be the case. Familiarity breeds contempt, but contempt does not breed familiarity.

Gary Hart

The commonwealth: our public legacy

The Founders were, virtually to a person, steeped in the ideals and theories of the classic republics. Like John Adams and James Madison, Thomas Jefferson employed his knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin to study the original texts of the classical republican writers, including Herodotus, Thucydides, Plutarch, Polybius, and Cicero. America's Founders had in mind to create a republic along classical lines, and to do so in a way never before tried, a republican federation with a reasonably strong central government.

But the foundation of our republic did not rest on formal structural elements alone. It also relied upon the disposition of the citizens who would inhabit it. Fortunately, according to the historian Gordon Wood, "all the notions of liberty,

equality, and public virtue were indelible sentiments already graven upon the hearts of Americans who realized fully the fragility of the republican polity." "Republicanism after all," he continues, "involved the whole character of the society."¹

The character of this new society manifested itself in adherence to at least four republican principles: popular sovereignty, resistance to corruption, civic virtue, and a sense of the commonwealth. "We, the people," the opening phrase of our Constitution, assumes the sovereignty of the people; indeed, today it is taken too much for granted. Corruption has unfortunately come to be seen as old-fashioned bribery rather than as it was originally conceived, as the act of placing special interests above the common good. For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on the last two: civic virtue, which we would today call 'civic duty' or citizen participation, and the sense of the commonwealth, from which civic virtue emerges.

Concern for the public interest, the sense of the commonwealth, is largely

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¹ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of The American Republic: 1776 - 1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969).

confined these days to high school civics courses, to the degree they are even offered. An effort by a political leader today to reawaken this ideal would be met with curiosity at best and a good deal of skepticism at worst. We find ourselves, after all, in an age of personal achievement, if not self-aggrandizement; with regard to money in particular, we inhabit an era of devil-take-the-hindmost. Anything suggesting collectivism, let alone collectivization, is highly suspect.

Yet, particularly among the young, there is a lingering feeling that we are all in this together, that we have a lot more in common than we often realize. This latent sense of community is often very near the surface. It springs forth usually in periods of national peril, such as September 11. At those times, we salute the sacrificial hero, the individual who places the interest or safety of others above his or her own. These salutes occur rarely enough to be notable.

A more tangible recognition of the common good lies within Article I, Section 8, of the Constitution, which empowers Congress, *inter alia*, to “provide . . . for the General Welfare.” After enumerating specific Congressional powers, this article gathers all unenumerated powers into the broad category of the general welfare, allowing posterity to determine in its own time and manner how it will define and achieve the general welfare. The general welfare clause represents an enormous exception to the fragmentation that the Tenth Amendment – which guarantees the various states all powers not enumerated in the Constitution – otherwise invites.

The interpretations of the general welfare clause by a variety of federal courts over more than two centuries are, at least from a judicial point of view, a valuable substantiation of the public inter-

est. But we can also distinguish concrete features of the public interest when we take note of how much we share. For instance, we breathe the same air and drink the same water. Harm to either is cause for concern across classes. We also live within the same borders; breach of those borders by those who wish us ill is a threat to all. Moreover, the health of our currency affects all of us to varying degrees. So the public interest includes a stable currency, secure borders, and clean and safe natural resources.

The public interest also encompasses, more specifically, parks and recreation areas, public lands, and mineral resources; public transportation and highway systems; public education systems; national security forces and public safety networks; public health systems; and a host of other facilities of which the vast majority of Americans do not consider themselves to be the proprietors.

Based on this list, it appears that to fall within the ambit of the *public interest*, an interest must transcend class, gender, race, and generation. It must be a concern of all. It must also be greater than a mere collection – even an extremely large one – of private interests. And an interest may be in the public interest even if an individual or the public is not particularly aware of its existence.

Unfortunately, in the current era, the idea of a public interest seems to have little impact on our everyday lives. Society finds itself in a period of individualism at the expense of the common good. Though these need not be competing visions, they currently are. There is no shortage of culprits to blame: Our educational system does not feature civic education. Our families generally do not cultivate civic virtue. Our political, business, and religious leaders do not stress citizen participation or duty enough.

Some events can immediately conjure up national feeling. Terrorist attacks and engagement in foreign conflict (at least in its early, successful phases) are the most vivid stimulants of national unity. When our country is under threat or in combat, political leaders, regardless of ideology, feel at liberty to call upon our patriotism. But these leaders do not find important challenges such as climate change, endemic poverty, uninsured masses, or poor education as interesting or as profitable to employ as social adhesives. Even Social Security, as an ‘entitlement’ program, unites society only as a pool of tens of millions of individual, self-interested accounts. Seemingly, only national security, in the shape of the threat of terrorism (the replacement for the threat of Communism), can stake a clear claim on the public interest.

Today’s political leadership must find ways to unify a complex, diverse, mass democracy behind efforts to address national threats that are not immediate or visible. But anyone with experience in public governance knows that mobilizing the mass, or even just a majority, of people is extraordinarily difficult if the threat is not immediate; if it is not shared equally and by all; or if it cannot be solved swiftly and with sheer force, but instead requires from each person some measure of sacrifice, whether in the form of increased taxes or government regulation.

Climate change is one such threat. It is manifestly in the public interest to prevent major, long-term damage to the environment. Nevertheless, it does not threaten all equally. Coastal property owners have more at stake than those in the Rocky Mountains do. Further, it is a global concern – one that the United States alone cannot deal with even if there were, as there is not, a national commitment to act. Climate change is

also less a threat to the current generation than it is to future generations.

Where the public interest is concerned, three questions always arise: does it exist; if so, how is it defined; and, finally, how can it be mobilized. The first is an issue of political philosophy, the second political theory. The last is a matter for political science. As one who believes the public interest does exist, I consider the primary goal of political leaders is to awaken a healthy regard for the commonwealth, even in the absence of an immediate, common, and tangible threat.

How are we to bridge the gap between the public interest, which is largely an abstraction, and the interests of individual citizens, which are mostly practical? What means exist, other than fear for their personal security, to induce people to care about the public interest?

The answer may rest in a version of Adam Smith’s famous dictum on economic self-interest in *The Wealth of Nations*: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but their self-love, and never talk to them of our necessities but of their advantage.” Likewise, if we can show the average citizen – the butcher, brewer, or baker – how achieving what is best for the public works to his or her advantage, we might be able to succeed at motivating citizens to tackle the important challenges facing our society.

Understandably, mobilization is easier when the threat appears in the figure of a terrorist letting loose a highly contagious pathogen at a crowded sports event than in the form of millions of commuters releasing tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. The instru-

ments of destruction alike cannot be seen, but we can easily demonize one agent, the terrorist, but not millions of respectable vehicle drivers. And in the first instance the destruction of human life is immediate while in the other it occurs over time.

Nonetheless, we can capitalize on at least one powerful human instinct in order to rouse civic sentiment: the desire to provide a better life for one's progeny than what oneself enjoyed. People in a capitalist society invest staggering amounts of energy, intellect, and skill in personal wealth production – and ultimately in their private legacy, the wealth they leave their children. Regrettably, it is not unusual for these same intelligent, energetic, and skillful people to neglect their public legacy entirely.

But consider this question raised in the New Testament: “What doth it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?” A less spiritual version of this question might prompt self-interested citizens to consider the public interest as integral to their own: “What does it profit a man if he leaves millions of dollars and valuable property in a gated community to his children, and they live in a polluted, corruptly governed, atomized world?”

Still, even if an individual believes that a definable public interest – and some ethical obligation to promote that interest – exists, the means to act in the public interest are now obscure, if not remote beyond access. How can one meaningfully exercise civic virtue in a democracy of three hundred million people? Are not the levers of power, and therefore sovereignty, so far removed from all but the financial and political elite that civic duty is a hollow ideal?

Before we can begin to answer these questions, we must think about scale:

does the size of the polity dictate, or at least circumscribe, the level and methods of citizen participation? For well over two centuries, two visions of America have competed to define the scope of the public interest. One notion is that of the Hamiltonian republic of centralized power, in which leadership is drawn from the great and the good, if not also the rich and the powerful. The other is the Jeffersonian republic of local self-government, in which responsible land-owning citizens govern their own community affairs. The former views the public interest through the prism of concentrated wealth, self-selected elites, and industrial interests. The latter believes the public interest would be best served by diverse communities sharing commitments, including education, safety, and care for the local poor.

A century ago, author and editor Herbert Croly, as keeper of the Hamiltonian flame, proposed wholesale dedication to the “national purpose.” Croly thought that it would involve “the nationalizing of American political, economic, and social life” and an “increasing nationalization of the American people in ideas, in institutions, and in spirit.”² A product of the Progressive movement and a precursor of Franklin Roosevelt (whose presidency encompassed the New Deal and World War II), Croly strongly resisted what he (wrongly) believed to be Jefferson's belief in antifederalism, decentralization, and fragmentation.

Croly's conception of nationalization takes the notion of the public interest to a far, if not its furthest, extreme. The public interest should not become a convenient excuse for ‘nationalizing’ political life. Regardless of where one resides on the centralization versus decentral-

2 Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1909).

ization spectrum, acting in the public interest arguably does not necessitate concentrated political power. Philip Pettit, the Australian political theorist, puts it this way: “A state would not itself dominate its citizens – and could provide a unique protection against domination by the private power of internal or external enemies – provided that it was able to seek only ends, and employ only means, that derived from the public good, the common weal, the *res publica*.” He continues: “The state had to be constrained as far as possible to track the common interests . . . of its citizens.”³

Pettit cites domestic harmony and external defense as examples of common interests. In doing so, he approaches a workable definition of the public interest: those goods that are best provided by citizens together in pursuit of a shared enterprise, goods that individual citizens cannot provide for themselves. But today, there are people who can provide for most, if not all, of their needs, and thus lack concern for the public interest, as well as a surprising number of citizens who will never reach this lofty station, but nevertheless think (or more likely, hope and pray) that they will be able to someday.

Aristotle’s vision of society as “a partnership of free men” supplies the missing ingredient in both Croly’s and Pettit’s conceptions. While acknowledging that “the state cannot be defined merely as a community dwelling in the same place at the same time,”⁴ Aristotle argued that civic virtue, rather than centralized state power, is necessary to convert a community of proximate dwellers into a partnership of free people: “All

those . . . concerned about good government do take civic virtue and vice into their purview. Any state that is truly so called and is not a state merely in name must pay attention to virtue; for otherwise the community becomes merely an alliance.”⁵

What setting is most conducive to the exercise of civic virtue? Surveying what she believed to be a surprisingly conservative American revolution, Hannah Arendt found that “only Jefferson among the men of the American Revolution ever asked himself the obvious question of how to preserve the revolutionary spirit once the revolution had come to an end.”⁶ His solution, she said, rested in the ward, or elementary, republic, in which citizens would govern locally but under the benign protective umbrella of a federated republican government. The assumption underlying Jefferson’s republics, wrote Arendt, “was that no one could be called happy without his share of public happiness, that no one could be called free without his experience in public freedom, and that no one could be called either happy or free without participating and having a share in public power.” For Jefferson, the public interest was irreducibly identified with participating and sharing in the power of government.

If one accepts the idea that the greater the distance between an individual and his or her government, the more difficult it is for that citizen to identify with the public interest, it should not be surprising that today in the United States the public interest has become an abstraction. At the very least, our situation leads us to wonder whether, two hun-

3 Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

4 Aristotle, *Politics*, III, iv.

5 See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.1099b.

6 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

dred years ago, Thomas Jefferson might have been right. Perhaps our founders, in their reliance on Montesquieu's idea of a federated republic based on representation, overlooked (or simply sacrificed) the key republican attribute of direct citizen participation in government.

If citizens are too distanced from government to care about the public interest, then who is defining the public interest in our day? Unfortunately, right now, thousands of special interests in Washington, D.C., are purporting that their agendas are compatible with, if not a part of, the greater public interest. But if one rejects, as I do, the notion that the public interest is merely the sum of all private interests, then we must question their claim. In reality, this clamor for special consideration obscures rather than reveals the public interest. In contrast, organizations such as Common Cause and The Concord Coalition solicit citizen membership in exchange for representing the broader public interest in the halls of power. By joining these organizations, a citizen may feel that he or she is contributing to the common good, as those organizations define it.

Though, at least in theory, we could call a constitutional convention to define the public interest for our time, this measure to reconnect the average citizen to the commonwealth is highly unlikely to take place. Instead, our best chance to reignite civic virtue is through the "elementary" or "ward" republics, where citizens can actively participate in defining the public interest in their communities. And though this country still has regional differences, there is a strong likelihood that the composite public interests, devised by tens of thousands of local republics across the nation, are surprisingly uniform. Were it made clear in local deliberations that we are all citizens of one nation with common hopes,

and that the interests of all and not the few must be brought to bear, this conclusion would be doubly true.

One of the ironies of trying to inspire dedication to the public interest in the United States is that at the core of our democracy is a system of rights – and among them is the right to be left alone. Not all democracies espouse this right: for example, some democratic nations make voting mandatory, a practice I find difficult to imagine the United States, with its strong streak of libertarianism, ever adopting. The limits to the ability to compel adherence to our commonwealth probably extend only to a certain amount of taxation as well as to some military service during a national crisis. So while we may conclude that a public interest exists, and have some common notion of what it includes, we have scant power to require citizens to contribute to it, protect it, or even pay respect to it.

The public interest has little hope of regaining its rightful place in the public consciousness in an age that values rampant self-interest. But there is every hope for this restoration if we recapture the principle that we must earn our rights by performance of our duties. The Cambridge philosopher Quentin Skinner put it best: it is "open to us to meditate on the potential relevance of a theory [of the republic] which tells us that, if we wish to maximize our own individual liberty, we must cease to put our trust in princes, and instead take charge of the public arena ourselves."⁷

7 "The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Christine Todd Whitman

Governing in the public interest: then & now

“Good policy is good politics” was one of Webster Todd’s favorite political aphorisms. Twice chairman of the New Jersey State Republican Party, a behind-the-scenes party leader who was one of those who traveled to Paris to persuade Dwight Eisenhower to come home from Europe and run for president as a Republican, and a delegate to numerous Republican National Conventions, Web Todd was what would have been called back in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s a member in good standing of the Eastern Republican establishment. He was also my father.

Underlying his belief that good policy was good politics was his conviction that government, and those who sought to lead it, had a responsibility to act always in the public interest, to serve the needs of the people, from whom government derives its legitimacy.

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During most of my time observing and participating in political life (I am somewhat abashed to admit that it has been more than fifty years since I attended my first Republican National Convention – and I have not missed one since), most of the politicians I have known and worked with had a fairly clear idea of what was meant by ‘the public interest.’ Without getting into a discussion of John Stuart Mill and the philosophy of utilitarianism, I believe they viewed serving the public interest as doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. It also meant protecting personal liberty, encouraging individual initiative and opportunity, and safeguarding the fundamental rights that every member of a free society possesses.

Contemporary political history (which I define as the political history I can remember) is filled with examples of Washington putting the public interest above partisan ones. Perhaps the most notable example is the passage of the landmark civil-rights bills in the mid-1960s: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The enactment of these measures required that Republicans and Democrats work together to end the insidiously persistent institutional instruments of racism in America.

Over the past forty years, the Democratic Party has received the lion's share of the credit for these bills. Undeniably, President Lyndon Johnson staked an enormous amount of his political capital on this issue. But he knew, because few have ever been better vote-counters than Johnson, that to succeed, his most important legislative priority had to have the backing of Congressional Republicans – and he was right. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would not have been possible without strong support from the Republican Party – from the most-senior Congressional leaders to the backbenchers.

Indeed, the measure would never have even come to the floor of the Senate had Senate Republican leader Everett Dirksen of Illinois not broken the Senate's longest filibuster in history (led by West Virginia's Robert Byrd). And when it did, 80 percent of the Republicans in both houses voted for it, as compared to just 61 percent of the Democrats in the House and 69 percent of those in the Senate.

One need not be a political science Ph.D. to imagine any number of scenarios in which the Republicans could have sought to play this issue for its own political advantage by handing Johnson a major legislative defeat. Instead, the Republicans acted in concert with their leadership counterparts across the aisle and with the White House to advance the greater good. Some will argue that by later tying the enactment of major civil-rights legislation to the Democratic Party, the Republicans were able to split the Democrats and lay the foundations of the 'Southern Strategy,' which broke the Democrats' century-long stranglehold on the South. But that was not the thinking at the time, for many Republicans would also face the displeasure of their constituents for their vote.

The first two decades of the modern environmental era (1970 – 1990) were also a time when Democrats and Republicans were able to come together to serve the public. They constructed an entirely new legal, regulatory, and institutional framework for preserving, protecting, and restoring America's environment. It was bold and thus controversial.

By the time Richard Nixon was inaugurated president in 1969, there was a growing consensus in the United States that the mechanisms then in place to safeguard what was commonly called the ecology were not working. Rivers were spontaneously combusting. People were choking on thick, dirty smog. Land all over America was being used as toxic waste dumps.

During the 1968 campaign, neither of the two major party candidates spent much time addressing the growing environmental crisis. Other, more immediate issues were confronting the voters and the nation: Vietnam was tearing the nation apart; street riots were igniting American cities; the country was still reeling from the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bobby Kennedy. And after the results of that election were decided, there was no love lost in Washington between the Republicans, who had just taken control of the White House for the first time in eight years, and the Democrats, who had been in control of Congress since 1955.

Yet despite the highly charged and politically adversarial atmosphere, a Republican president and a Democratic Congress, beginning in 1970, enacted the environmental laws America so badly needed. Looking back, we tend to think such actions were inevitable. They were not. Many Republicans were wary of too much regulation, and some Democrats thought there could not be enough. But

in spite of this difference and all the other tumult rocking the American political system in the late 1960s and 1970s, the leaders of both parties refused to let the sort of hyperpartisan gridlock we see in Washington today pollute environmental policymaking.

It was in this era that the vast majority of the laws that form the foundation of our current approach to environmental protection came into being. President Nixon established the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970. The enactment, with bipartisan support, of such landmark laws as the National Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Air Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Clean Water Act quickly followed. The bipartisanship continued with the subsequent passage, under Presidents Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush, of the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Toxic Substances Control Act, the Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act, the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act, the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, and the Pollution Prevention Act.

Every one of those laws was the product of a Congress at least partially in the control of one party and a White House in control of the other. And the votes on these measures were rarely very close. The bipartisan effort to build the foundations of American environmental policy took place during some of the most politically contentious times in the past fifty years. Yet when it came to serving this greater public interest, the parties were able to get the job done.

Since 1992, on the other hand, we have seen just one piece of major environmental legislation: the Brownfields Revitalization Act in 2002. The need for further environmental action at the federal level exists. But nowadays few serious policy analysts argue that federal action

to cap greenhouse gas emissions, especially carbon, would be in the public interest. Today's political environment simply does not support the sort of bipartisanship that advanced such progress in the past.

We must not forget, however, that over the past fifty years the federal government's desire to serve the public interest has also led it into areas in which it was not best suited to advance the public good. History has demonstrated that when government acts too aggressively, even in pursuit of a common goal, it can overreach and actually exacerbate the ills it seeks to reverse.

The 1960s approach to eliminating poverty in America best exemplifies this phenomenon. While Lyndon Johnson's legislative agenda for eradicating poverty did not require broad bipartisanship for enactment, he was clearly driven, at least in part, by what he saw as the public interest. After all, few, either at the time or since, have argued that reducing poverty is not a worthy goal. The legitimate debate has largely been about the means.

Johnson positioned the War on Poverty as a far-reaching effort to serve the public interest by reducing the direct and ancillary effects that poverty has on our society. The War on Poverty represented the apogee of the New Deal: subsequent efforts to overcome poverty by providing a stable and guaranteed source of income, including Richard Nixon's Family Assistance Plan, championed by Democrat Daniel Patrick Moynihan, were never able to gain much political traction.

It was not until this 'war' was nearly in its fourth decade that policymakers from both sides of the aisle (not just from the right) began to acknowledge publicly that many of the programs enacted un-

der Johnson were miring families (or what was left of them) in an endless and unbroken cycle of dependency and despondency and had to be changed.

On the Republican side of the political divide, Jack Kemp perhaps best summed up the failure federal welfare policy had become with the memorable declaration, “The War on Poverty is over, and the poor lost.” On the Democratic side, Bill Clinton, during his 1992 presidential campaign, promised to “end welfare as we know it.” He repeated those exact words when, in 1996, he signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, which required states to develop programs to move welfare recipients off welfare and to work.

At both the beginning and the conclusion of the federal government’s dominant role in delivering direct cash assistance to the nation’s poor, one can argue that policymakers were acting in what they saw as the public interest – lifting people out of poverty so that they could live more productive and healthy lives, lives that contribute to the greater good rather than detract from it.

What changed over the years was the policy designed to achieve that goal. It evolved from the belief that what the poor need is a reliable financial floor on which they can build a better future, to the realization that any effort to help raise the poor out of poverty requires more than financial support. Experience in the decade since the end of welfare ‘as we knew it’ suggests that providing people with the incentives, training, and supports needed to enter and remain in the workforce is more successful at reducing the number of welfare recipients than providing income guarantees.

In New Jersey, the welfare-reform legislation I proposed and signed into law in 1997 set a five-year lifetime cap on the eligibility of recipients to receive public

assistance. The cap provided a much-needed incentive to welfare recipients to find work. We also recognized, however, that we could not expect welfare recipients, many of whom had never held a steady job, to enter the workforce without significant levels of training and support. In New Jersey, the support included transportation grants, child-care assistance, educational and job-training grants, and a state Earned Income Tax Credit.

By the time I left office in January 2001, the welfare caseload in New Jersey had dropped from 96,500 families (when I signed welfare reform) to 45,000 – a decrease of more than 50 percent without the commensurate flood of homeless people predicted by the critics. The progress we made in New Jersey was also reflected across the nation. In August 2006, on the tenth anniversary of federal welfare reform, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) reported that welfare caseloads for families nationwide had decreased by 59 percent, while caseloads for individuals had declined by 65 percent. In addition, HHS reported that child-poverty rates dropped from 20.5 percent to 17.8 percent, lifting 1.4 million children out of poverty.

As Larry DeWitt, a public historian at the U.S. Social Security Administration and self-described skeptic about welfare reform, put it in an essay he wrote in 2005, “The policy-history narrative here turns out that about half the welfare population has been successfully moved from dependency to self-support, their employment has proven stable, childhood poverty has declined, and no social crisis attended this shift . . . I [was] simply wrong about this law. The historical evidence has trumped [my] political and ideological suppositions.”

The history of welfare policy in the United States over the past forty years provides an instructive example of how the political process can work – and even change course – to meet the public interest. Along with the passage of civil-rights and environmental legislation, which clearly put the public interest ahead of partisan political interests, it begs the question: why do the elected branches of the federal government seem unable to address the public interest today?

Over the past decade, the commitment to serving the public interest, which led to action on difficult and vexing problems, has been replaced by a commitment to serving much narrower interests, not just in political campaigns (where that has always been the case), but also once the elections are over and the time for governing begins.

The increasing and well-documented use of divisive wedge issues that appeal to narrow but electorally valuable constituencies has made it increasingly difficult to govern. This is particularly true when both of the elected branches of the government are controlled by the same party. All too often, the result is the loss of any effective checks and balances on the ability of the majority party to drive its wedge issues once it is in power. When paired with the disproportionate ability of that party's base to demand action on its most important partisan (but not necessarily widely popular) issues, it is a recipe for the triumph of partisan political interests over the public interest.

Over the past several years, too much of our political leaders' attention has been consumed with serving the electoral masters who are not shy about claiming credit for putting them in office. Nowhere has this been more obvious than in the Republican Party's fealty

to that segment of the electorate I call the social fundamentalists.

The social fundamentalists are those voters who base their votes entirely on their rigid positions on a narrow list of social issues, such as abortion, embryonic stem cell research, gay marriage, and end-of-life decision making. They are motivated, single-issue litmus test voters whose perceived contributions to the election of a Republican Congress and of George W. Bush to the White House have held the Republican Party hostage for the last ten years.

The Terri Schiavo tragedy is perhaps the most egregious example of the Republicans in Washington caving in to the power of the social-fundamentalist section of its base. Schiavo was the Florida woman who fell into a vegetative state in 1990 and spent nearly fifteen years being kept alive by what anyone would define as extraordinary means. In late 2004, when her husband decided to end those efforts, and the Florida courts affirmed that he had the right to make that decision, her care became a cause célèbre for the social fundamentalists.

As the day when Schiavo's feeding tube would be removed drew closer, emails and phone calls from groups who wanted Congress to overrule the decision flooded Capitol Hill. Peggy Noonan wrote that unless Republicans in Congress acted to prevent the removal of the feeding tube, "they will face a reckoning from a sizeable portion of their own base." And so, Congress acted with unusual speed, and President Bush flew back from his ranch in Texas, to sign the bill into law. The sway of those fundamentalists was such that even some moderate Democrats ended up voting for that intervention.

What seemed like a certain political winner did not turn out that way. The

leaders of the GOP mistook the passionately and effectively expressed demands of the social fundamentalists for broader support among the American people. Polls taken shortly after Congress and the president acted showed that huge majorities of the public, even among self-identified evangelical and conservative Republican voters, opposed federal intervention in this case. An ABC poll found that 70 percent of those asked thought Congressional intervention in this case was inappropriate, while a USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll reported that 76 percent of people disapproved of Congress's action.

As can happen when a victim is held hostage for a long period of time, the GOP has developed a case of Stockholm Syndrome; we are now so closely identified with those who have been holding us captive that we do not seem to understand that the best interests of the public – and often of the party – are frequently not aligned with those of the social fundamentalists.

As a result, the Republican Party is in danger of losing its commitment to its historic principles: a strong national defense, a foreign policy that is engaged with the rest of the world, fiscal responsibility, less government interference in people's lives, opportunity for all, and the preservation of our environment. These are the principles that have long defined the Republican Party, and they are principles that also serve the public interest.

The Democrats are facing much the same challenge from the left of their party. If this danger is not readily apparent, it has much to do with the fact that the Democrats have been the minority in Congress until recently, and have been shut out of the White House since the 2000 election. As 2007 unfolds, I would not be surprised if Speaker Nancy Pelosi

and Majority Leader Harry Reid have a difficult time resisting the pent-up demand in their caucuses to make every issue they tackle every bit as partisan as they perceive the Republicans to have acted since 1994 – a perception that is based, at least in part, on reality.

What are we to do about those pressing issues in which the public interest is being neglected? Climate change, immigration reform, the continued solvency of Social Security and Medicare, the growing number of uninsured, and enormous federal deficits all loom, yet they are not being addressed. One answer may be found in divided government, by which I mean control of one of the elected branches by one party (or split between the two) and control of the other branch by the other party.

Through most of the political history I have witnessed, divided government has been the norm. In the fifty-one years since I attended my first Republican National Convention in 1956, control of both houses of Congress and of the White House by one political party has been the reality for just eighteen of those years. But because political parties will always want to gain as much control of the institutions of government as they can, the adage, 'Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it,' serves as an appropriate caution.

During the seven years I served as governor of New Jersey, my party controlled both houses of our state legislature – and by fairly comfortable margins. Holding such control is not without its share of political benefits. The confirmation of nominees to judicial- and executive-branch positions is (usually) easier. The enactment of major policy initiatives is far likelier. And the executive is largely spared dubious, politically driven 'oversight' investigations.

It does, however, also have its downsides. On numerous occasions it would have aided my attempts to govern from the sensible center if the Democrats had controlled one (and one would have been enough) of the two houses of the legislature. This arrangement would have blunted the power of the social fundamentalists within the Republican caucuses to push their agenda, and it would have helped create a more conducive atmosphere for finding a reasonable compromise on contentious issues. Nowhere would this have been more useful than in 1997, when the issue of partial-birth abortion surfaced.

That year, I was up for reelection as governor, a pro-choice governor in a pro-choice state. (No pro-life candidate has won a statewide election in New Jersey since *Roe v. Wade*.) Knowing the Democrats would not nominate a pro-life candidate, I expected the abortion issue to be off the table during my reelection campaign. It would have been, except for the fact that the pro-life faction of the Republican caucus in the lower house (which was also up for reelection) was demanding passage of a partial-birth abortion bill.

To forestall primary challenges, many pro-choice Republicans also decided to back the legislation, even agreeing to leave out any exceptions for the life or physical health of the mother. They knew that having sworn to uphold the state's constitution, I could not sign a bill that did not protect the life and health of the mother. Their lawyers also assured them that, even if I did sign it, New Jersey's Supreme Court would likely rule it unconstitutional.

Hoping to find common ground and avoid a veto override, a court challenge, and a bad law, I let the legislature know that I would sign a bill that banned all late-term abortions, so long as it provid-

ed for the protection of the life and health of the mother. I also made clear that I would veto any bill that did not.

When the legislature passed the bill with its original language, I had no choice but to veto the bill. Subsequently, the legislature overrode my veto (the only override during my tenure as governor), and the bill became law. But not for long: the state Supreme Court, as expected, threw it out as unconstitutional.

Had we Republicans not had complete control of both elected branches of state government, we could have enacted a constitutionally sound law regulating late-term abortions. It would not have met the litmus test of the fundamentalists, but it would have put an end to the vast majority of late-term abortions. The irony is that had a compromise been reached, it would have represented the first set of restrictions of any sort on abortions in New Jersey. As it is, nothing has changed. This is just one situation where divided government would have resulted in better public policy.

The national public-policy achievements I discussed earlier were, in every event, the product of either actually divided or essentially divided government. In the case of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (the exception among them), the Democrats controlled both Congress and the White House. However, because of the profound regional split within the Democratic caucus on this particular issue, divided government was essentially the reality when this issue was on the table.

Unfortunately, I do not expect the recent takeover of Congress by the Democrats – and the reinstallation of divided government – to lead to an embrace of the public interest over the next eighteen months. The absurdly early presidential-nominating process, the palpable hunger of the Democrats to regain the White House, the toxic political environment

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in Washington, and the political weakness of the Bush administration guarantee that little of substance will come out of Washington before the end of the president's term.

Nevertheless, I am not so pessimistic as to think that our political system will continue to ignore the public interest to the extent it has in recent years. I believe that the wisdom behind my father's maxim that good policy makes for good politics will again become apparent and compelling. The status quo is simply unsustainable. It is, however, up to the American people to demand the change and to participate in the process.

Robert N. Bellah

Ethical politics: reality or illusion?

It would be well, before reflecting on whether the idea of ethical politics is a reality or an illusion, to consider briefly the meaning of ethical politics, or to put it bluntly, whether many Americans see any relation between ethics and politics.¹ As we found out in our research for *Habits of the Heart*, most Americans think they know what they mean by politics (and by politicians), and it is not nice. Politics is the way some people get what they want by using undue influence, questionable tactics, even thinly veiled forms of bribery. If this widespread understanding of politics is correct, then the answer to the question my title asks is clear from the start: politics

is not ethical. Indeed, almost by definition, in the minds of many Americans, politics is unethical.

Yet we claim to be a free, democratic, and self-governing society. For most people all those terms are positive. Indeed, we tend to divide the world between democratic societies, which are good, and undemocratic ones, which are bad. But how do we exercise our freedom, how do we govern ourselves in a democratic society, except through politics? And if democracy is good, how can the political practices that make it work be inherently corrupt?

One might say, it is not that democratic politics are inherently bad; it is just that ours at the moment are bad and we need to reform them. Fair enough. Most institutions, families, marriages, and individuals could use some reform. But will just putting stricter rules on lobbyists make our politics ethical, or are there deeper issues that we need to think about, issues concerning both ethics and politics?

When I was asked to write this essay, I was examining ancient Greece, the

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¹ This essay is a revision of a talk first delivered as the Henry Bugbee Lecture in Philosophy in the President's Lecture Series at the University of Montana, April 3, 2006.

birthplace of democracy, and of the very terms 'politics' and 'ethics.' Our democracy, a representative democracy, is very different from ancient democracy, a direct democracy in which all citizens, or most of them, actively participated in their own governance. Nevertheless, Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, found something that he considered similar to ancient direct democracy in the New England town meeting. And we can still see direct democracy at work in many civic associations and in many religious congregations.

Tocqueville argued that without this network of voluntary associations, civil society would not be possible. These forms of association, and the practices that they require, help to create the "habits of the heart" – the kinds of individuals and the way they treat each other – necessary for democracy. Some may think that all one needs to have a democracy are elections, but the current situation in the Middle East is teaching us that elections are not sufficient. In fact, without democratic habits of the heart, free elections may simply reproduce the tyrannical institutions that are to be found not just in the government but throughout the society.

The experience of direct democracy (if not at the national level, then at the level of the many associations and groups that make up society) is crucial for an effective democracy, because democracy is a form of self-government, in contrast to monarchy or tyranny, which are forms of government by one person, or to aristocracy or oligarchy, which are forms of government by a small group of people. Direct democracy, in whatever context, gives us the experience of self-government. Ideally, it should create a sense of what we call community, what the Greeks called *koinonia*, the civic friendship that creates trust between members

and makes it easier for them to accept differences of opinion and compromises when opinions are divided.

A long tradition of democratic theory also holds that only citizens who can govern *themselves* can effectively participate in governing others. If, as Aristotle argued, politics in the true sense involves governing and being governed in turn, we must know how to put the common good before our own. But does that not run up against the very nature of individuals, which compels them to put their own interests first? And does that not contradict the teaching of Adam Smith that if we all pursue our self-interest, things will work out for the best?

But if we read not only *The Wealth of Nations* but also his equally important book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, we will find Smith saying that no good government can exist on the basis of self-interest alone. His notion of the invisible spectator, whom we must always keep in mind if we are to be truly ethical persons (his version of what Immanuel Kant later called the categorical imperative) requires that we put the common interest above our own. Smith believed that the pursuit of self-interest was a proper principle in the economy, but not in politics. Indeed, without a framework of ethical politics, a purely self-interested economy would quickly lose the trust that even economic transactions require. (Later, I will raise questions as to whether we understand self-interest in the deepest sense.)

What I have been suggesting is that if we really want a democratic society, ethical politics is not an option – it is a requirement. Political philosophers all the way back to Plato believed that different forms of political regime are linked to different types of person, traits of character, and principles of behavior. One influential version of that idea was that

of the Baron de Montesquieu, who lived in France in the early eighteenth century, and whose book, *The Spirit of the Laws*, was influential among the founders of the American republic.

Montesquieu wrote about three types of government: despotism, monarchy, and democracy. The principle of despotism is fear: one must always worry about the arbitrary action of the despot. The principle of monarchy is honor: Monarchy is characterized by significant intermediate institutions led by nobles who compete with each other. Motivated by ambition, nobles are jealous of their honor. The principle of democracy, however, is virtue: Those who rule must consider themselves under the same laws as those they rule. Thus they must put the common good above their own.

Would Montesquieu consider the United States today to be a democracy or a monarchy? One early-twentieth-century philosopher, George Santayana, had this to say: "If a noble and civilized democracy is to subsist, the common citizen must be something of a saint and something of a hero. We see, therefore, how justly flattering and profound, and at the same time how ominous, was Montesquieu's saying that the principle of democracy is virtue." How ominous indeed. Most of the founders of our republic thought it unlikely to survive any great period of time. John Adams thought it would last about fifty years. We think they were wrong, but if we examine closely what a democracy really is, we might not be so sure.

Winston Churchill is widely believed to have said, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others." That statement is usually interpreted somehow as a ringing endorsement of democracy, which is a convenient way of avoiding what its initial

clause might mean: democracy is the worst form of government. We could imagine Plato agreeing with the first clause, but also with the second, for he hated tyranny (or despotism) and had only the most fanciful idea of monarchy – that philosophers should be kings, an idea he had no hope would ever be put in practice. Indeed, after the excesses of the Thirty Tyrants in late-fifth-century Athens, Plato came to think of the extreme democracy that had preceded it as a golden age. Still, Plato was a great critic of democracy.

Fifth-century Athens was perhaps the only example of true – that is, direct – democracy that history has ever seen, at least in a city of any size. We must remember, though, that Athens, while the largest Greek city in its day, had a population in the fifth century of not much more than two hundred thousand. And Athenian citizenship was limited: women could not vote and slaves were not even citizens. Also, resident aliens not only could not vote, they could not be naturalized: only if their father was an Athenian could they become citizens.

Even with these restrictions, the fact that every citizen, regardless of wealth, had the same rights and could hold any office is unparalleled in history. Most Greek cities, though they included most citizens in the assembly, reserved the important offices for the aristocrats or the wealthy. Athens in the early fifth century removed this restriction, placed all power in the hands of the democratic assembly, and chose its officials by lot or by election.

Because of the great achievements of the Greeks (particularly cultural, culminating in fifth-century Athens in art, literature, and thought), we are tempted to forget that the Greeks were always warriors, and that Greek citizens were warrior-citizens, called very frequently to

fight for their cities. The infantry, composed of moderately wealthy farmers, had been the backbone of democracy everywhere it had appeared in Greece. But after the great naval battle at Salamis in 480 BC, when the Athenian navy defeated the much larger Persian fleet, the navy became the main military force of Athens, the basis of the empire that Athens proceeded to build – first as a defensive alliance against Persia, then as territory to be exploited for the gain and glory of Athens.

The need for oarsmen in the Greek ships gave a new status and income to the Athenian lower class, those without property, from whom the oarsmen were drawn. Since they were the basis of Athenian military supremacy, they had to be fully included in the assembly, the source of all power in the Athenian state. That these oarsmen loved their country there is little doubt; that they had an interest in the extension and maintenance of the Athenian empire is also without doubt. It was the empire that undermined Athenian virtue, gave rise to demagogic politicians, involved brutal oppression of many conquered cities, and finally led to complete political and military disaster. To top it off, it was the atmosphere of anxiety and fear following political and military disaster that led to the democratic murder of the one man for whom Plato had the greatest respect in the world, Socrates. No wonder Plato was a critic of democracy.

He was not alone. It will probably be a surprising assertion to many readers, but the central icon of American history, Abraham Lincoln, was, in one sense, a critic of democracy. Recall the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, when Lincoln and Douglas were running against each other for the office of senator in Illinois. The crux of the debates had to do with whether slavery should be extended to

the territories. Douglas argued that the decision should be left to the citizens of the territories, most immediately Kansas. Lincoln argued for a federal prohibition of the extension of slavery because slavery is inherently wrong and should not be left to the majority in the territories to decide. Majority rule may be better than any other form of government, but majority rule cannot decide the issue of good and evil. Let us not forget that Douglas, not Lincoln, won the senatorial election.

Michael Mann in his book *The Dark Side of Democracy* has detailed the crimes that democratic nations have committed, especially in situations of war or ethnic conflict.² I myself am old enough to remember the evacuation of Japanese Americans from the West Coast and their relocation in concentration camps after Pearl Harbor. Although it was done by executive order, not by popular vote, there was no public outcry. Moreover, at the height of the McCarthy period in the 1950s, an experiment took place where pollsters read to people an unidentified text of what was in fact the Bill of Rights. A majority of the sample said they disagreed with it, and many said it sounded like Communist propaganda. One comes back to Santayana's remark that the idea that the principle of a democracy is virtue is profound, but also ominous. What happens in a democracy when virtue fails? And since virtue is fragile and vice hardy, should we be surprised when virtue fails?

Several examples of democratic failure that I have already mentioned – slavery, the treatment of Japanese Americans in World War II, and one could add the eth-

2 Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

nic cleansing of Native Americans – have to do with the question of inclusion and exclusion. Tocqueville warned against the tyranny of the majority: the democratic majority often feels little or no obligation to minorities and badly mistreats them.

But today we face another huge problem: in the age of globalization there is no world democracy. Democracies exist only within nations, and democratic nations on the whole feel little in the way of ethical obligations to outsiders. It is often said that globalization means the end of the age of the nation-state, but in any absolute sense that is clearly untrue. It is particularly untrue with respect to democracy: there is no democracy beyond the nation-state. The United Nations, weak and ineffective though it is, is better than nothing – but a global democracy it is not. What are the consequences of the fact that democracy is limited to nation-states?

In a sense, our problem is Athens's problem writ large: how could the Athenians grant citizenship to natives of their colonial cities, many of them hundreds of miles away, when they could never attend the Athenian assembly (even if the Athenians had wanted them to, which they did not)? The Athenian assembly instead acquiesced to extraordinary brutality against rebellious cities in their empire, in the name, by the way, of national security.

G. E. R. Lloyd, the British classicist, in a chapter of his 2004 book, *Ancient Worlds, Modern Reflections*, entitled "A Critique of Democracy," points out the basic contradictions between democracy within nations and justice in the world:

In the current political situation that every democracy faces, there is no advantage for any statesman in being an internationalist and often considerable disadvantages. I

remarked on how lobbying creates imbalances in the debate on national issues. But the consequences on international ones are far more severe. Who, in the nation-state, is there to represent global or international interest? Nobody gets elected to do just that, and if you do take an internationalist stand, you may be lucky if you are not made to pay for it by losing support from those on whom you *do* depend to get elected, who put you there to look after their interests, not those of anyone else.³

Lloyd focuses on the two great issues that can only be addressed globally, but that national democracies seem incapable of dealing with, largely because of their mistaken notion that looking out for themselves alone is their primary task: the issue of global warming and environmental degradation; and the issue of global inequality, the enormous contrast between rich and poor nations, with all the consequences that go with that. "It is clearly intolerable," he writes, "for a tiny proportion of the world's population to live in the greatest luxury while many of the rest have no hope of escape from grinding poverty."⁴ He sums up our situation, one so dangerous that even the self-interest of the privileged, one would think, would lead them to action: "The main dangers in the present geopolitical situation are clear, the threat to the environment worldwide, the ways in which increasing inequality fuels the fires of future resentment, the frailty of the geopolitical order." As a citizen of the United Kingdom, he points out that in much of the world, the United States is seen as the

3 G. E. R. Lloyd, *Ancient Worlds, Modern Reflections: Philosophical Perspectives on Greek and Chinese Science and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 182.

4 *Ibid.*, 184.

problem, not the solution, because it has become “a law unto itself,” believing that “if the rest of the world does not accept U.S. policies, too bad for the rest of the world.”⁵

Fortunately, while Lloyd’s diagnosis of the “weaknesses of democracy at both the national and the international level is utterly bleak, and the prognosis is almost equally so,”⁶ he does not completely despair. There is always the possibility of reform, and despair can be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If the problem of Athenian democracy was corruption at home and imperial arrogance abroad, is there perhaps a parallel, even at an enormously greater scale, in our own situation? Let me begin by taking a closer look at our own national democracy, particularly the degree to which we have lost the very ethos that makes democracy possible. That is, let me begin with the question of virtue. Socrates was speaking not only to his fellow Athenians, but to all of us, when he said our first concern should be with the virtue of our own souls. In a democracy we govern and are governed in turn. And in the most powerful democracy in the world, we to a significant extent govern the world. Every time we vote, however problematic our electoral system is, we are exerting that power to govern. Are we worthy of it?

Although we are responsible for the virtue of our own souls, it will be extremely unlikely that many of us will be virtuous if we live in a vicious society. We need to be concerned, therefore, with the health of our society as well as the health of our souls. As I noted previously, Montesquieu held that the prin-

5 Ibid., 185.

6 Ibid., 184.

ciple of a monarchy is not virtue but honor. He also uses the word ambition, which makes more sense to us today. Ambition can replace virtue in a monarchy because the people have ceased to be self-governing; they accept the machinery of government, the “springs and wheels,” as Montesquieu puts it, that have been set up by others, and only attempt to increase their own power and riches within the limits of rules set by those above them. To some extent this is inevitable in a representative democracy, which cannot engage the full responsibility of its citizens, but if Tocqueville was right, some degree of direct democracy at the local level is necessary to keep alive the virtue without which democratic freedom cannot survive.

Unfortunately, we have good evidence, most comprehensively summed up by Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*,⁷ but confirmed by Robert Wuthnow’s book *Loose Connections*⁸ and many other studies, that the societies, groups, and associations that have provided the experience of direct democracy to Americans are all in more or less precipitate decline and have been so for thirty years or more. Our connections have become looser not only to groups and associations but to jobs and even families. More and more we are forced to make it on our own, and ‘personal responsibility’ has become a kind of mantra that we should not expect help from anyone else because we have to make it all alone.

This is just the social situation in which ambition replaces virtue and

7 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

8 Robert Wuthnow, *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America’s Fragmented Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

monarchy replaces democracy. But we still have elections – how can we be a monarchy? Tocqueville had an answer to that. He called it “soft despotism,” in which the outer trappings of democracy survive but in fact people who have lost their freedom rise up every four years to elect their rulers and then sink back into the torpor of their slavery. Elective monarchy is not an unheard-of political form in human history. With the rise of the imperial presidency, maybe what we have is an elective empire. Montesquieu reminds us that monarchies can do great things, but at a price: “In monarchies,” he writes, “policy effects great things with as little virtue as possible.” Indeed, “in well-regulated monarchies, they are almost all good subjects and very few good men.”

My question is not a rhetorical one and certainly not a sentimental one, for the gravest consequences hang on it. Can a society that has become a kind of monarchical machine run by private ambition, effectively lacking in virtue and human goodness, be able to face the enormous ethical problems of the world today? So when in my title I ask whether an ethical politics is a reality or an illusion, I am not asking about bribery or deceit among our politicians, but about the state of our society that makes such bribery and deceit routine. My question is indeed a daunting one, a double one in fact: can we recover the dignity of politics as a calling for every citizen in a democracy, one requiring all the virtue we can muster, and then can we extend that democratic citizenship so that in some significant sense we can be citizens of the world, responsible for the future of our planet as well as of our own society? Not easy, you say. Surely not easy, but think of the consequences if we fail.

Recovering our capacity to govern ourselves and our world effectively will require reforms that are simultaneously social and ideological. Putnam speaks of declining social capital, a metaphor I am not fond of and which he told me privately he had chosen so as to seem to be doing ‘hard’ political science, by avoiding such a ‘soft’ term as community. Whatever the term, we need to reinvigorate or create anew the thousands of small direct democracies that give our citizens the experience of governing and being governed in turn.

Putnam reminds us that there are two kinds of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital creates groups that have internal solidarity. That, as such, is to the good. But if that solidarity stops at the boundaries of the given group, it can produce as many problems as it solves. We also need bridging social capital, the capacity to reach out to other groups to create larger solidarities. If we have groups with only bonding and not bridging social capital, we have what we most fear: a society that is nothing but a collection of special-interest groups, each seeking its own good with no regard for the common good. And, of course, this is the most challenging issue that faces us in the world as a whole: can we create bridging social capital that will cross national boundaries and create international solidarity? Indeed, we have such groups, relatively small and fragile, but exemplary of what we need at a much larger scale: Doctors Without Borders, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and a host of others.

Voluntary associations may be weaker now than they were through most of the twentieth century, but they are not absent in the United States. One of Putnam’s more hopeful findings is that through most of the twentieth century,

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up until about 1960 or 1970, our social capital was increasing. What went up for decades has now been in decline for decades, but such recent shifts show that we can change directions again and gain our sense of social citizenship rather than lose it even more. And the international organizations, or the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), some of which I have mentioned, seem to be growing.

We need not only a social transformation but also an ideological one. They entail each other. Here the challenge is daunting, and the relevant initiatives not yet very coherent. Through much of modern history some form of socialist ideology has countered the ideology of capitalism. While the free-market ideology espoused entrepreneurship as the solution to all our problems, socialism was concerned with the welfare of those whom entrepreneurship exploited or abandoned. The terrible excesses of Communist tyranny have given all kinds of socialism a bad name, although in much of the world outside the United States political parties with 'socialist' in their names continue to win elections. But even these parties have been co-opted in many cases by neoliberalism, a moderate form of American free-market fundamentalism, so that a robust alternative to the idea that the market will solve all problems has been hard to find of late.

Where so many have been trying, with no great success, to formulate a new vision that would offer a serious alternative to free-market fundamentalism, I will not even attempt such a task, important though it is. Rather, what I want to do in the rest of this essay is draw from my work on ancient Greece and ask some preliminary philosophical questions about the very basis of an ethical

politics that might help us deal with the enormous problems that we are largely ignoring at present.

So far, I have assumed a dichotomy that our culture takes for granted, namely, the contrast between self-interest and concern for the common good. The easiest solution to this contrast in our culture is the idea that if we all pursue our self-interest and are as selfish as possible, the result will be the common good, an idea I noted earlier Adam Smith did not endorse. The great corporate scandals of recent years have tarnished the slogan of the 1980s that 'greed is good', but the idea is alive and well; often the mantra of 'individual responsibility' is only another version of the same thing.

The idea of self-interest – so natural particularly in the Anglo-American tradition, where utilitarianism, usually in a fairly debased form, is the common ideological coin – has had its critics. Tocqueville proposed one answer that is appealing to many today: the idea of self-interest rightly understood. What Tocqueville is really pointing to is the difference between short-term and long-term self-interest. What seems desirable now may prove harmful to us in the long run. Unless we keep that long run in mind, self-interest will be self-defeating.

One example of this is the notion that reducing carbon-dioxide emissions would be bad for our economy – the reason we have not ratified the Kyoto Protocol. If we do not act to halt or slow global warming, we will be irreparably harming ourselves, or if not ourselves, then our children and grandchildren. Most people, however selfish, do care about their children and grandchildren. Thus, if self-interest leads us not to care about global warming, self-interest rightly understood will lead us to care. I

have no problem with this argument: to the degree it works I am all for it.

I want, however, with the help of Plato, to raise an even deeper question, one related to the idea that the principle of democracy is virtue. That is the question of the real meaning of self-interest, leaving aside short- or long-term issues. Is it ever in our self-interest to do something that will harm others? This is the central issue in Plato's early masterpiece, *Gorgias*, described by Charles Kahn, the great scholar of ancient philosophy, as the founding document of Western moral and political philosophy.⁹

Plato has Socrates face three successive interlocutors, each of whom believes that doing whatever one wants justifies ignoring moral restraints. The first two, *Gorgias* and *Polus*, Socrates disposes of fairly quickly. In the end, both are ashamed to admit that they justify immoral behavior in the name of self-interest. It is the third, Callicles, a rising young Athenian politician of Plato's own aristocratic class, who is the most dangerous. Callicles says he is not ashamed to say openly what everyone really believes, namely, that one should get what one wants at whatever cost as long as one can get away with it, that success and riches are all that count.

Socrates, who defends the idea of justice – that is, treating everyone justly and never harming anyone, even those who have harmed oneself – does not just denounce Callicles's idea; he tries to show Callicles that he himself does not really believe it, because he, like everyone else,

knows that one's real self-interest is doing the good, that behaving unjustly is a disease of the soul, and no one would consciously choose disease over health.

It is important to remember, because the teachings of Christianity put things somewhat differently (though I do not think that in the end they are antithetical to the teaching of Socrates/Plato in this regard), that Socrates is not telling Callicles to stop thinking of himself and start thinking of others. Socrates is telling Callicles to *really* start thinking of himself, to ask himself what kind of soul he wants to have. For to Plato our common contrast between egoism and altruism, a secularized version of Pietist Protestantism, is meaningless. A true concern for the good of the self would lead us to see that only a just self is good, and a just self treats all others justly.

In short, according to Plato, nothing is more injurious to the self than harming others, and no one who properly understood himself would do such a thing. Our true desire, our deepest need, is to have a good self, and a good self acts well to all others, even to not returning evil for evil, an idea that centuries of readers have seen as parallel to the teachings of another ancient figure who lived in a nearby country. Indeed, when Callicles gets really exasperated because Socrates is making him see that even he is ashamed of his own selfishness, he warns Socrates that going around talking as he does could end up getting him killed.

I am suggesting that an alternative ideology to the one that dominates our society today, an alternative that seems illusory to the realists of our time, but that is the only way to make ethical politics a reality, is a recovery of a true understanding of the self, one validated not only by Plato's moral philosophy, but also by most of the great religions

9 Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and The Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 125. Kahn actually says, "Plato may be said to have founded moral philosophy twice: once in the *Crito* and a second time in the *Gorgias*."

and philosophies of mankind. We live in a society obsessed with the self: above all, most of us want to be rich, powerful, beautiful, and admired, or at least one of the above; and I certainly cannot claim to be an exception. But instead of saying we are too obsessed with the self, perhaps we should say we are not obsessed enough; we have not looked deeply enough into what we really want, which is the just self, capable of treating others justly in the context of a just society.

In *Gorgias* Plato seems to be concerned only with the individual self, but even there we find a concern for the larger society. Socrates admonishes Callicles not to become a kind of pirate, engaging in limitless evil in order to get what he wants at any price. Such a person, Socrates says, is friend to neither man nor god: "For he is unable to share in any community, and where there is no sharing there is no friendship. Callicles, wise men say that heaven and earth and men and gods are bound together by community and friendship, by orderliness and temperance and justice, and for this reason they call the universe *kosmos*, world-order, not disorder nor dissoluteness."¹⁰

For Plato, the concern for society moves to a concern for the world as a whole, for the divine as well as the human. Plato's most ambitious works, *The Republic* and *The Laws*, are designs for a good society, one in tune with the harmony of the cosmos, designs that are problematic to us to be sure, and not ones we would want literally to implement, though some scholars today believe they were intended to stimulate reform of democracy, not abolish it. But Plato was surely right that a good self and a good society entail each other, and in the age of globalization we must

add, a good self and a good world entail each other.

However we might want to formulate a counterideology to the dominant one (could we say a really democratic one in contrast to our present monarchical one?), we could certainly start with Plato's idea of justice as essential in the soul and in society, and with Montesquieu's application of democratic virtue with the principles of equality and frugality. Frugality might seem an old-fashioned idea, an expression of purely private virtue. Yet frugality in today's world is an ecological imperative. If the rest of the world, or even just China and India, were to share the number of automobiles per capita in the United States, we would quite literally be cooked. But can we ask the rest of the world to be frugal in the use of fossil fuel while we go on with our wasteful ways? Today, frugality is not an option, it is a necessity, and only shortsightedness makes us deny it.

Similarly, global equality, not in an absolute sense, but with significant reductions of present disparities, is equally necessary. While writing this essay I got a form letter from Jimmy Carter at the Carter Center. It began: "It is a challenge you and I dare not ignore. I am talking about the growing global chasm between the rich and the poor. To me, a truly rich person is someone who has a decent home and education, a chance for a job, reasonable access to health care, and the opportunity to live a secure life."

He points out how far most of the world is from those minimal conditions for a decent life and how it is our obligation to do something about it. To me, Jimmy Carter is one of the few Americans who understands what it is to be a citizen in a democracy as Montesquieu understood it. So listening to Jimmy Carter and reading his recent book, *Our Endangered Values*, may be a good place

¹⁰ *Gorgias*, 507E–508A, trans. Kahn, *Plato and The Socratic Dialogue*, 143.

to start if we want to build an alternative ideology with some chance of getting us out of the mess we are in.¹¹ I am not saying Carter has all the answers – no one does. But he knows that looking at the self and looking at the world are two sides of the same thing. And that is perhaps the best place to start if we are to reform the corrupt democracy in which we live, and make our democracy a responsible citizen in a dangerously demoralized world.

¹¹ Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).

Amy Gutmann

*The lure & dangers of
extremist rhetoric*

In a democracy, controversy is healthy.¹ Complex issues as far-ranging as immigration, health care, military interventions, taxation, and education seldom lend themselves to simple, consensual solutions. The public interest is well served by robust public argument. But when disagreements are so driven and distorted by extremist rhetoric that citizens and public officials fail to engage with one another reasonably or respectfully on substantive issues of public importance, the debate degenerates, blocking constructive compromises that would benefit all sides more than the status quo would. Like many scholars, American citizens today discern a link between the impoverished, divisive dis-

course that pollutes our politics and culture, and the diminished capacity of America's political system to address intelligently, let alone solve, our most challenging problems – from health care to global warming, from public education to Social Security, from terrorism to this country's eroding competitive advantage in the global economy.

To help us understand the nature of this link between extremist rhetoric and political paralysis, let us begin with an example of extremist rhetoric in entertainment, where it is even more common and far less controversial than in politics. Many Americans over the age of forty may remember the weekly "Point/Counterpoint" segment from *60 Minutes*, which pitted the liberal Shana Alexander against the conservative James J. Kilpatrick. Even more will recall the spoof of "Point/Counterpoint" from *Saturday Night Live*, where Dan Ackroyd resorted to a show of verbal pyro-

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1 This essay is adapted from lectures delivered at the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University, Brown University, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. I thank those audiences along with Sigal Ben-Porath, Sam Freeman, Jim Gardner, Rob Reich, Steve Steinberg, and Dennis Thompson for their excellent advice.

technics as he drove a single point to the ground, while effacing Jane Curtin as an “ignorant slut.”

Jane and Dan were clearly not out either to advance the public interest or to respect one another. Nor should they have been. *SNL* is, as they say, entertainment. And when extremist rhetoric is intentionally outlandish, it makes for great entertainment. But when it is politically for real, extremist rhetoric has far less benign effects on democratic discourse: it demeans opponents, radically narrows understanding of the issue at hand, and closes off compromise.

As we have seen all too vividly, extremist rhetoric has become par for the course of democratic controversy in America. It dominates cable TV news. (Talk radio is even more extreme.) The public issues discussed are complex and important, but little light is shed on them. The entertainment is that of a wrestling match, with far less demonstrable skill.

Serious extremist rhetoric has two defining features. First, it tends toward single-mindedness on any given issue. Second, it passionately expresses certainty about the supremacy of its perspective on the issue without submitting itself either to a reasonable test of truth or to a reasoned public debate.

Extremist rhetoric, of course, admits of degrees. Imposing single-minded certainty on just one complex issue is extremist, but not as much as being single-minded on every issue. Likewise, the certainty with which one argues a point may be more or less impervious to evidence and argument. Extremist rhetoric also comes in many secular and religious varieties.

If we are discerning in our analysis, we can also distinguish extremist rhetoric from merely extreme rhetoric. Extremist rhetoric refers to the expression of sin-

gle-minded certainty by true believers in their extremist ideology. Extreme rhetoric often is hard to distinguish from extremist rhetoric because it takes its language out of the same rhetorical playbook, but those who speak the words do not subscribe to an extremist ideology.²

Why, then, do nonextremists go to rhetorical extremes and sound like true believers? Because they can gain at least a short-term tactical advantage by sounding extreme. Outrageous, inflammatory remarks make for good copy, and it is often easier to speak in extreme sound bites than in moderate ones. Politicians can use extreme rhetoric in a calculated way to capture the public's attention, to rally support of single-valued interest groups, and to mobilize voters.

For the sake of our discussion, let us group extreme and extremist rhetoric together under the label of extremist rhetoric, and consider the three most salient questions about extremist rhetoric in democratic controversy. First: what makes it alluring at all? Second: how can it imperil democratic discourse in spite of the constitutional protections of free speech to which it is entitled? Third: is there any potentially effective way of responding to the prevalence of extremist rhetoric in our political culture other than trying to beat one kind of extremism with another?

What is the lure of extremist rhetoric in democratic controversy? After all, most citizens are not extremists. Part of the lure lies in the fact that it is easier to believe passionately in a value or cause without regard to subtlety, reasoned argument, probabilistic evidence, and vigorously tested scientific theory or fact. Expressions of single-minded visions for

² I thank Ambassador Robert M. Beecroft for helping me clarify this point.

solving problems and changing society can make complexity and uncertainty, frustration and regret, all appear to evaporate. Another part of the lure is that having comrades-in-argument is comforting.

If extremist rhetoric has popular appeal, at least on its face, what could be wrong with the overwhelming prevalence of extremist rhetoric in democratic discourse? After all, extremists have a constitutional right to speak in extremist language as long as they are not directly threatening other people. Our answer to the question of what is wrong with extremist rhetoric is essential to understanding both why its prevalence endangers the public interest that democracy should serve, and why so many democratic citizens, even many initially drawn to some forms of extremist rhetoric, find it increasingly troubling over time.

Going as far back in political philosophy as Aristotle, political rhetoric has been employed in the service of reasonable persuasion concerning questions of justice or the public good. Aristotle maintained that the “proper task” of rhetoric is to drive home the logic, the truth, and the evidence of an argument. Reason should frame a good politician’s goal to persuade. The opposite of a sound democratic argument is demagoguery: manipulation and deception in order to divide and conquer the democratic populace. Extremist rhetoric is a common tactic of demagoguery: it divides in order to conquer.

Mobilizing one’s base and arousing people’s passions are natural parts of democratic politics. Aristotle recognized that rhetoric at its best appeals concomitantly to our passions as well as to our character and our reason. The problem with extremist rhetoric is that it mobilizes the base by spurning reason and playing exclusively to the antagonistic

passions of disrespect and degradation of argumentative adversaries. Extremist rhetoric insidiously undermines the democratic promise of mobilizing citizens on the basis of some reasonable understanding of their interest and the public interest.

Extreme rhetoric has the same effect as extremist rhetoric because it expresses itself in the same way. It is extreme simply for the sake of gaining attention and mobilizing the base. While we may not worry that extreme rhetoric reflects a dangerous underlying ideology, we should be concerned that it is unnecessarily disrespectful of argumentative adversaries.

Unlike extremist rhetoric, extreme rhetoric is almost always either deceptive or worse: It blatantly disregards and devalues truth-seeking understandings upon which citizens in a democracy may make informed judgments. It also undermines a basic value of representative politics. When politicians use extreme rhetoric to mobilize their base in cavalier disregard of the vast majority, they strip the moderate middle of a voice in governance.

The problem for representative democracy, therefore, is that many people who are not ideological zealots manipulatively use extreme rhetoric for their own mutually disrespectful political ends – at the same time as zealots of all ideological stripes insidiously subvert the compromising spirit of democracy through their use of extremist rhetoric. Since so much of representative democracy depends on politicians’ wooing the votes and support of citizens to govern in our names, what politicians say matters mightily.

Examples of polarizing political rhetoric abound in American history, which is not to say that America ever enjoyed

a 'golden age' devoid of extremist rhetoric.³

At the 1992 Republican National Convention, for example, Pat Buchanan launched a tirade against advocates of abortion rights, women's rights, gay rights, and the separation of church and state: "My friends ... there is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the cold war itself."⁴ The very description of the disagreement on public policy as 'war' pushes not only extremists but also moderates into more extremist positions, and undermines the opportunity for reasoned argument and respectful compromise.

This troubling tendency to polarize is by no means reserved for the Right or the Republican Party. Many prominent Southern Democrats unleashed virulent strains of extremist rhetoric to whip up the resistance against civil rights for American blacks. During his inaugural address in January 1963, Alabama Governor George Wallace portrayed his state as "this Cradle of the Confederacy, this very Heart of the Great Anglo-Saxon Southland," and declared, "In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyran-

ny ... and I say ... segregation today ... segregation tomorrow ... segregation forever."⁵

In the hypercharged climate of post-9/11 American politics, extremist political rhetoric has grown vituperative. President George W. Bush and his administration have frequently been compared to Hitler and the Nazis. One of the most infamous examples is a television ad produced by MoveOn.org that aired during the 2004 campaign. The ad begins with images of Hitler and German military might during World War II and recordings of Hitler speaking. At the end of the ad, a photo of Bush raising his hand to take the oath of office appears, accompanied by the following statement: "A nation warped by lies. Lies fuel fear. Fear fuels aggression. Invasion. Occupation. What were war crimes in 1945 is foreign policy in 2003."

On the right, some elected officials have all but explicitly equated both opposition to the Iraq War and criticism of President Bush's foreign policy with treason. Following the Supreme Court ruling that rejected the Bush administration's argument that it could establish military tribunals without Congressional authority, then-House Republican Majority Leader John Boehner said, "I wonder if [the Democrats] are more interested in protecting the terrorists than protecting the American people." During a House debate on the war in Iraq, Republican Congresswoman Jean Schmidt relayed this message from an Ohio State Representative to Democratic Representative Jack Murtha, a Marine Corps veteran and a leading advocate for troop redeployment: "Cowards cut and run, Marines never do."

3 For colorful and well-documented accounts of the (figuratively and often literally) bruising political battles during the early years of the American republic, see Richard N. Rosenfeld, *American Aurora: A Democratic-Republican Returns: The Suppressed History of Our Nation's Beginnings and the Heroic Newspaper That Tried to Report It* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); and Jeffrey L. Pasley, "The Tyranny of Printers": *Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001).

4 Pat Buchanan, address to the Republican National Convention, August 17, 1992.

5 George C. Wallace, inaugural address, January 14, 1963.

Extremist rhetoric is hardly the exclusive domain of party politics. Here is a recent example of extremist political rhetoric from outside the domain of professional politics: “This is Jihad, pal. There are no innocent bystanders, because in these desperate hours, bystanders are not innocent. We’ll broaden our theater of conflict.”⁶ These remarks could have come straight out of the mouths of the Islamic terrorists who murdered Daniel Pearl. In fact, this speaker, Mike Roselle, is an environmental extremist. His rhetoric calls for war on the ‘guilty’ – the unconverted – in the name of the supreme value of environmental preservation.

Extreme and extremist rhetoric tends to divide, demean, and deceive democratic citizens. To put it metaphorically but not inaccurately: Such rhetoric is junk food for the body politic. It clogs two major arteries that nourish constitutional democracy and the inevitably imperfect but all the more important drive to serve the public on salient issues: mutual respect and morally defensible compromise across differences.

The increasing prevalence of extremist rhetoric poses not only a moral dilemma but also a great practical puzzle for moderates because most extremist rhetoric does not pose a ‘clear and present danger’ to our democracy. In addition to being entertaining to many, extremist rhetoric does not directly threaten anyone’s life, property, or well-being. Its entertainment value therefore can easily lull us into neglecting and even ignoring its dangers.

And, as I indicated at the outset, not all extreme or extremist rhetoric is nec-

essarily bad for democracy. Indeed, some perilous times may need a healthy dose of extremist rhetoric. For example, we rightly applaud those who, when confronting slavery in antebellum America, called for its abolition with certainty and single-mindedness and defended liberty as the supreme value.

Yet we also must remember that passionate certainty in the service of a supremely just cause is not enough in politics. In *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, Doris Kearns Goodwin recounts how Secretary of State William Seward, because of his early hard-line rhetoric, surrendered the ability that Abraham Lincoln maintained, by virtue of his own more tempered rhetoric, to unite a coalition to stop the spread of slavery and ultimately to defeat it.⁷

Even in a supremely good cause – which the abolition of slavery certainly was – extremist rhetoric tends to appeal to an already convinced base. It excludes all those who might join a more moderate and more winning political coalition. When many people’s lives and liberties are at stake, being right is not enough. Being politically effective is morally essential as well.

When Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater prepared to accept the Republican nomination for president in 1964, he became the target of widespread attacks from moderate Republicans, who charged that his views were dangerously extreme. Goldwater directly confronted these attacks in his famous acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention. “I would remind you,” he said, “that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you also

6 Mike Roselle in *Earth First! Journal* (December 1994/January 1995).

7 Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 14 – 15.

that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.”⁸

Goldwater’s is one of the most powerful defenses of extremist rhetoric – and action – in the annals of American politics. He was right that extremist rhetoric in a good but single-valued cause – such as liberty – can be a great virtue, depending on the context and its capacity to mobilize a majority toward advancing the public interest. But Goldwater failed to acknowledge that extremist rhetoric even in a good cause can be dangerous.

Why are Americans rightly wary of extremist rhetoric even in a good cause? First, by its very nature, extremist rhetoric excludes from consideration other important public values. Liberty is not the only important value for American democracy. Education, health care, and opportunity, for example, also matter, and indeed are essential for the well-being of a majority of Americans.

A second concern about extremist rhetoric, even in a good cause, is that it condemns without further consideration those who dare to disagree. No single value, not even liberty, can safely claim to be a ‘total solution’ to the problems afflicting humankind; therefore, those who disagree should not be dismissed out of hand – and denied the respect that their views deserve – simply by the rhetoric employed in a worthy cause.

The defense of justice, however, is far more resistant to extremist rhetoric, because justice is a consummately inclusive moral value in democratic politics. It internally admits other public values under its rubric, including liberty, security, equal opportunity, and mutual respect among persons. The passionate defense of justice therefore can be a ral-

lying point for nonextremists who want to make a public difference.

To sum up the significant dangers that extremist rhetoric today poses to a constitutional democracy:

- It shuts out consideration of competing values that are basic to constitutional democracy. Neither liberty without security and opportunity, nor security and opportunity without liberty is a tenable option.
- It shuts down constructive conversations that offer relevant evidence and argument that can improve public decisions.
- It denigrates and degrades rather than respects those who beg to differ. Abortion-rights proponents become ‘baby killers.’ Anti-abortion advocates are ‘religious wing nuts.’
- It even discounts the intelligence of the followers of rhetorical excesses. Callers to Rush Limbaugh’s talk radio show are known as ‘Dittoheads’ because they form an amen chorus to Limbaugh’s extremist rhetoric.

Another problem with extremist rhetoric from the democratic perspective of pursuing the public interest arises from the psychological frailty called hubris. Even granting that some extremists are right, we still must recognize that the vast majority of people who seek public power and influence are all too prone to believe without warrant – yet with subjective certainty – that they have the absolute right on their side. They therefore indefensibly denigrate and dismiss the many reasonable and respectable people who disagree with them. They also block constructive examination of their own values and beliefs. The aftermath of the U. S. intervention in Iraq painfully illustrates the problems attending a politics

⁸ Barry Goldwater, acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, July 16, 1964.

in which public officials and their supporters fail to take the facts into account, and also refuse to consider more than one side of the argument.

Appreciating the dangers of extremist rhetoric leads us to the third and final question: what is our most reasonable remedy for upholding the pluralistic values of constitutional democracy? The most enduring remedy is closely related to the fact that a majority of democratic citizens are not themselves extremists. The most reliable surveys and scholarly studies consistently find a far more pluralistic and open-minded electorate than the public catered to by extremist rhetoric on cable TV and talk radio and among many political elites.⁹

The remedy must help us counter what can best be called rhetorical rage: the phenomenon of one form of extremist rhetoric breeding another, counter-extremist rhetoric. Here is an example that illustrates how far rhetorical rage has spread – in this case, to scientists – in a country whose citizens are overwhelmingly moderate and reasonable. Creationism is often communicated in extremist terms, as part of a comprehensive divine plan, and as such is impervious to the mountain of evidence that refutes its claims to being a scientific theory that disproves the theory of evolution.

Recently, in response to creationism, an opposite form of extremism – which calls itself science but really is scientism – has emerged and gained a following.

9 Morris Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005); Alan Wolf, *One Nation After All: What Middle-Class Americans Really Think About God, Country, and Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, The Right, The Left, and Each Other* (New York: Viking, 1998).

Scientism expresses an equal and opposite certainty, which also defies reason, that all human understanding derives from the comprehensive rational value of scientific inquiry. It treats religion – and religious believers – with open contempt. Richard Dawkins, for example, proclaims that “faith is one of the world’s great evils.”¹⁰ Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens indict all organized religions for inciting hatred and abetting humanity’s propensity for cruelty and murder. With single-minded fury, all three drive democratic discourse deeper into the cycle of mutual disrespect and denigration. Trading one kind of extremism in for another – creationism for scientism – does not bode well for an informed public policy.

Worse than rhetorical rage are extreme political responses to extremist rhetoric. The French parliament, for example, adopted a bill in 2006 making it a crime to deny that Armenians suffered genocide at the hands of the Turks. This is an extreme reaction to extremism.

Democracy’s most reasonable hope for countering demagoguery is the democratic lure of morally engaged pluralism. The vast majority of American citizens realize that they have multiple interests, ideals, and preferences. And they are more satisfied when democratic politics attends to those interests, ideals, and preferences.

How can American democracy take better advantage of the lure of morally engaged pluralism? Well-educated citizens can practice what Dennis Thompson and I describe as “an economy of moral disagreement.” When we argue about controversial issues, we should defend our views vigorously while ex-

10 Richard Dawkins, “Is Science a Religion?” *Humanist* 57 (January/February 1997).

pressing mutual respect for our adversaries. We can do this by not preemptively rejecting everything for which our political adversaries stand.¹¹ Take the controversy over creationism. I can staunchly defend evolution against creationism as a scientific theory while also recognizing that science does not have answers to most of the great cosmological questions that religion addresses. Nothing will thereby be lost, and much will be gained. Practicing “an economy of moral disagreement” engenders mutual respect across competing viewpoints and, as important, makes room for moral compromise. No democracy can function – let alone flourish – without moral compromise over reasonable differences.

Can morally engaged pluralism be an effective rhetorical strategy? The reasonable hope lies in the fact that most democratic citizens are not extremists. And respecting multiple points of view carries more lasting and long-term benefits in democratic politics than playing exclusively to a narrow political base.

However, morally engaged pluralists must not check all emotions at the door. “Rationality is a bond between persons,” the philosopher Stuart Hampshire observed, “but it is not a very powerful bond, and it is apt to fail as a bond when there are strong passions on two sides of a conflict.”¹² Rationality *alone* is apt to fail as a bond, but morally engaged pluralists have every reason to be passionate as well as rational in their rhetoric. The

moral stakes in pursuing the public interest could not be higher; life, liberty, opportunity, and mutual respect are the lifeblood of a flourishing democracy. For morally engaged pluralists to be effective, we must be passionate as well as reasonable in our rhetoric. Passion supported by reason elevates democratic debate while also making it more alluring and effective.

In searching for antidotes to extremism, there is therefore no substitute for a better democratic education in robust, reasoned, and respectful political controversy and debate. We need to teach students how to engage with one another over controversial issues. Students must first learn how to recognize demagogic rhetoric and then how to counter it, both individually and institutionally.

Well-designed democratic institutions can dramatically reduce the toxic effects of extremist rhetoric. We need to support institutional structures whose incentives encourage respectful controversy. Less partisan gerrymandering would foster more representative democratic rhetoric. Well-structured debates and factcheck.org blogs can expose extremist and extreme rhetoric that is deceptive and subversive of the democratic pursuit of the public interest.

Democratic citizens should not wait for the media and our political leaders to reform themselves. All pluralists – the vast majority of democratic citizens – can play an important part today in criticizing extreme and extremist rhetoric and in defending a more democratic, less demagogic rhetoric of morally engaged pluralism. We can do so both reasonably and passionately in keeping with our character as morally engaged pluralists.

This never-ending pursuit of the public interest in a democracy is not a value-neutral enterprise. Pluralist citizens are committed to upholding the spirit of

11 See Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1996); and Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

12 Stuart Hampshire, *Justice is Conflict* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 94.

constitutional democracy beyond what the letter of the law requires us to do.

We must recognize that demonizing and demeaning our opponents to mobilize like-minded people in democratic politics is a legal but nonetheless demagogic way of driving constitutional democracy into the ground.

Democracy's saving grace is that most citizens are put off by demagogues and their techniques. By recognizing that the person with whom we disagree, far from being an "ignorant slut," typically has a valid point worth considering, we can work together as fellow citizens who respectfully disagree with one another to give our great constitutional democracy a longer lease on life.

Lance Taylor

The flavors of economics & the public interest

Two hundred years ago, the ancestor of today's economics was called political economy: it was political in that it had a strong connection with political philosophy and a focus on public policy. Nowadays, political economy is called classical economics. It was succeeded late in the nineteenth century by a neo-classical revision that itself diverged into contending schools, but still controls the policy debate, especially in the United States.

This genealogy is useful because the different flavors of economics incorporate distinct attitudes about the public interest. How the state interacts with collective actors is central to the distinction. On the surface, mainstream eco-

nomics does not consider collective actors at all. Rather, like the chorus in a Greek play, it incessantly chants that the economic system is populated by highly competitive 'agents' with good information, who strive to maximize their own well-being (profits for firms and consumption 'utility' for households) within an observed price system. These choices lead to a welfare level as high as it possibly can be for each participant. Shorthand labels for this level are Walrasian equilibrium, named after a late-nineteenth-century French economist, Leon Walras, and Pareto optimum, after Vilfredo Pareto a bit thereafter. When the equilibrium is perturbed, prices rapidly adjust to signal how resources should be reallocated to ensure that they are fully employed – with the proviso that the only way that one actor could gain additional income would be for another to lose.

However, policy practitioners may group agents into wage-earners, profit recipients, the government, etc. So to speak, collective actors enter via the back door. Moreover, even the agents in the play may have a hard time behaving as the chorus thinks they should – an insight often credited to Alfred Marshall, another nineteenth-century founding economist – because economic

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information is, in practice, not fully reflected in prices: 'Distortions' such as taxes and tariffs (almost always blamed on government intervention) lead decisions astray. Monopoly positions exist that, further supported by increasing returns to scale (or decreasing costs per unit of production), can deform the price system. All these forces push the economy away from a Pareto optimum.

Mainstream economists and pundits thus vacillate between the view of the chorus and the travails that the agents confront. Most – notably those in a position to influence policy – continue to take the perspective of the chorus while seeking to expunge whatever distortions may exist. Advocates of liberalizing international trade belong to this group. Others construct mathematical models about the manifold optimization problems that economic actors in daily life are supposed to resolve. A main theme of their work is how asymmetric information between agents can force the system away from a Pareto position. State intervention may at times improve the situation. More recent empirical work on topics like minimum wages and poverty has drifted away from mathematized behavioral models, but remains informed by the narrow neoclassical worldview. To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, 'thin description' is the order of the day.

In contrast to the mainstream picture of the economy is the classical (or more generally, 'structuralist') perspective, which has roots in politics and sociology. The economists Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, and Karl Marx adopted this view. Rather than focusing on either the price-mediated functions of the whole system or the behavior of individual agents, they highlighted the dealings of collective actors – organized groups or classes such as capi-

talists, landlords, and peasants. In the twentieth century, John Maynard Keynes took this approach, directing his wrath against bear speculators and high-saving rentiers, who could slow economic growth by seizing up the financial system.

In this alternative account, relationships among collective actors help determine relative prices and income distribution, and influence technical progress and supply. Smith and his successors were clearly aware of the importance of technological advance – routinely measured by increases in the average productivity of labor – often stemming from decreasing costs, as in the famous pin factory. Such scale economies are much more easily realized in some sectors of production – notably but not exclusively industry – than in others. Classical economists saw economic development as the expansion of sectors with increasing returns (web search is the most striking recent example) while sectors with more mature technologies gave way.

On the other side of markets are factors that determine the level of effective demand. For Keynes, among these were the "animal spirits" of investing firms, but they also include the upswings and downswings of household spending. These factors also influence the pace of growth in productivity. The economy's position depends on these interacting supply and demand systems.

Prior to Marx with his reserve armies (and in line with the present-day mainstream), the classical economists assumed that forces on the supply side would determine overall output and employment, in part as an empirical generalization from the fact that in a poor economy lacking a differentiated structure of production an employable worker will not long survive without holding some kind of job. This postulate of full

employment was named Say's Law after Jean-Baptiste Say, a French contemporary of Ricardo's. The law is enforced in a general way over long periods of time – unemployment does not rise indefinitely. But over decades it certainly can: witness Western Europe over many years stretching into the twenty-first century.

Contemporary structuralists also emphasize how accounting balances among economic actors – essentially, what is bought must be sold and what is borrowed must be lent – play a crucial role in determining how supply and demand forces interact. Keynes's basic insight that often (though not always) the level of effective demand determines aggregate supply emerges from such macroeconomic accounting restrictions. His rejection of Say's Law hinged on the observation that in an economy with a complex financial system there can be a long and variable period between the sale of one commodity and the use of the proceeds to buy another. Supply need not create its own demand, but rather adjusts to the demand that is out there.

Finally, underlying both demand and supply are shifting financial decisions by collective actors such as bull real-estate and stock-market speculators and bear hedge funds. The Asian crisis of 1997 was a replay of many prior episodes in which financial turbulence derailed the productive side of the economy.

So how do the different schools try to enhance the public interest through economic policy? The differences in their attitudes toward the public interest are apparent in the contexts of foreign aid as well as recent patterns of growth and income distribution in the United States. Let us turn first to the arena of foreign aid, and development policy more generally, for examples that are certainly at the forefront of international debate.

An adage from Lao Tzu sums up the contradictory aspects of aid: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." The true purpose of aid is presumably to help a man (or a national economy) sustain himself (or itself). For successful 'fishing,' the economy should maintain 2 percent annual per-capita output growth, and employment creation should keep pace with population growth. This combination can make a big dent in poverty by increasing average income by 22 percent over ten years and by 49 percent over twenty.

Foreign aid has certainly helped launch 2 percent or faster per-capita growth in diverse policy environments. In many cases, limited availability of hard currency is the crucial bottleneck in a developing economy, holding down both supply and demand. If effective demand can increase because foreign exchange is available to pay for the associated imports, it can stimulate private-sector investment and innovation. At the same time, the imports can bring in essential goods and technologies to raise productive capacity.

The first, most successful aid efforts were the post-World War II Marshall Plan in Europe and the parallel reconstruction program in Japan. They emphasized breaking foreign-exchange bottlenecks via coordinated public and private interventions, as opposed to market liberalization. It is worth recalling that the Americans who helped implement reconstruction were New Dealers at ease with an interventionist state.

In the 1960s and 1970s illiberal and bureaucratically planned South Korea utilized capital inflows and American-guaranteed market access to create a formidable industrial base, beginning with textiles. It then built the world's biggest

integrated steel plant, eventually moving on to chip manufacture, automobiles, and broadband Internet coverage for over 90 percent of the country. South Korea's international economic situation was a consequence of cold-war politics, but its planners took full advantage of the opportunities they had.

In the 1980s, Chile sidestepped the rest of Latin America's 'lost decade' because it received ample foreign assistance from international aid agencies favoring its neoliberal policy stance. Increasingly sophisticated raw-material exports supported its economic expansion. Several economies in sub-Saharan Africa also now have respectable growth rates, because of Nordic and other donors who have provided steady aid over decades for their own geopolitical reasons.

Two-percent overall growth has several implications. First, it requires even higher growth rates in labor productivity in the leading sector(s), which in many poor economies is agriculture. Despite its adverse effects on income distribution, the aid-fueled Green Revolution successfully increased both land and labor productivity. In time, though, with real income growth, agriculture's shares in GDP and employment inevitably decline.

At higher income levels, the lead sector(s) must offer increasing returns and opportunities for robust output growth in response to demand. A clear pattern of structural change emerges from the data for economies – today mostly in East and South Asia – that sustain rapid growth. As in South Korea, industry almost always serves as the engine for productivity growth, though not job creation. For a sector or the entire economy to generate employment, its per-capita growth rate of demand has to exceed its productivity growth. Net job creation usually takes place in services.

In this situation, more foreign resources can help raise industry productivity, so real incomes can rise, and ease the demand constraint economy-wide, and people can be employed. Ultimately, exports and private capital can provide hard currency, as in Asia now, but aid can help get the growth process started.

In all these countries, a combination of technocratic top-down policy and spontaneous innovation from the bottom up created landmark shifts in economic structure. Even in neoliberal Chile, the government consistently supported expansion of mineral and agricultural exports. Unfortunately, neoclassical arguments to the contrary are highly influential today, even though they were completely ignored at the time of the Marshall Plan or South Korea's growth spurt. A widely held idea in economics now – first clearly stated by the founding neoclassical Austrian school from Vienna in the 1870s – asserts that rapid growth can only emerge from private entrepreneurship with clear property-rights protections. (William Easterly is a recent epigone).

History belies the proposition. Besides the cases of the now-industrialized economies and twentieth-century success cases that we have already seen, in which the state proactively intervened in development, consider the United States in the nineteenth century. Agricultural exports prevented a foreign-exchange bottleneck. Enormous public subsidies (with enormous corruption) supported investment in infrastructure, and the highest tariffs in the world protected industry. Entrepreneurs – from Rockefeller to the robber barons – abounded, but paid scant heed to conventional property rights.

In less strident versions, the Austrian argument dominates much current discussion of aid and development policy,

especially among major donors. The famous 'Washington consensus,' now seemingly entering remission, strongly emphasized private-sector initiatives and strict limits on state guidance of the economy. In an argument dating back to Ricardo and built solidly into neoclassical theory, elimination of barriers to trade was supposed to generate big gains in economic efficiency. Thanks to Say's Law, workers and enterprises displaced by the removal of protection would be reemployed in other activities without significant hitches.

But over the past two or three decades, many aid packages and economic 'reform' programs informed by the consensus did not generate linkages among demand growth, productivity, and employment. Per-capita income levels did not rise, and workers displaced by trade liberalization vanished into informal and subsistence activities. Foreign aid became at best a dole, and at worst a cesspool for corruption.

Certainly, doles can have positive impacts at the micro level if one can avoid problems ranging from an established, exploitative class structure to Marshallian distortions and information asymmetries. A handout from abroad may cure smallpox or alleviate childhood malnutrition – but it is a handout notwithstanding. In recent decades many poor countries have seen marked improvements in primary education and health care, but their economies have not been able to grow. Even if they succeed on their own terms, people-oriented technical fixes at the household level – advocated by individuals such as Bill Gates and Jeffrey Sachs – do not directly stimulate economy-wide expansion and enduring poverty alleviation.

Foreign assistance is bound to be available in limited quantities. Cost estimates for the Millennium Development Goals

(MDG), a humanitarian aid program emphasizing technological tricks to bring quick results, range upward from \$150 billion per year. Current aid flows, including debt relief, are on the order of \$100 billion in principle. In practice, the transfer is far less. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is not allowing governments to channel forgiven debt toward increased spending on poverty reduction because of its phobic fear (not supported by any evidence) that a modest increase in fiscal outlays will kick off uncontrollable inflation.

Even if aid mounted, the IMF relented, and humanitarian goals were realized, the MDG effort can only be successful if it puts economies on paths of sustained growth. In the past aid has sometimes set off growth, but more often it has not. There are many challenges to overcome: At the micro level, augmenting human capital by itself will not support steady growth unless highly productive enterprises get started. Entrepreneurship is essential to this end, and should be rewarded. But that will not happen spontaneously in a liberalized market environment. The state has to play a strong supportive role.

Unfortunately, Washington consensus packages currently bind the hands of governments in developing countries. To direct their limited resources toward productive ends, these governments must have the available 'policy space' to use instruments like sensible tariffs and trade quotas, targeted credit, and production subsidies. Scale economies are potentially available in many lines of endeavor – the task is to identify and support them. Linking fetters on development policies to disbursements of aid – standard practice for the World Bank and IMF – is completely counterproductive.

In the United States, productivity growth and distributive conflict have come to the fore. Although growth since the recession of the early 1980s has been relatively stable, the rates are unimpressive compared to the post-World War II golden age of market capitalism. More ominously, inequality has widened. Even with generous corrections for fringe benefits, index-number biases, and the business cycle, real-wage growth has not kept up with labor productivity. Across cycles, the wage share of output (equal to the real wage divided by productivity) has declined and the profit share has risen. The wage gap between skilled and unskilled workers has grown, and a chasm has opened between median, mean, and even 99th percentile wages and payments to top executives, entertainment and sports stars, and financiers (who are in a higher income bracket than even the top executives).

The standard neoclassical explanation for these trends is that they are inevitable: the economy is at a Pareto optimum, which because of factors such as globalization, increased use of information technology, and financial innovation has shifted in favor of the affluent. But from a broader perspective, we must ask why such income concentration has been permitted to occur. Surely something in the nature of the social contract must have changed.

Take, for example, the CEO of Norway's Norsk Hydro, a company dealing in oil and aluminum. There was public outcry over his pay package this summer. Because the center-left government owns 44 percent of the company, the Minister of Trade and Industry intervened. The CEO ended up with a 10 percent raise on a salary of roughly \$1 million per year, but his accrued stock options were trimmed to around \$4 million with no more to be granted in the future.

The Hydro chief is presumably as competent as his counterparts at smaller American competitors, but they make at least ten times what he does. His relative penury is in part a consequence of the Nordic socioeconomic model, which has rested for decades on income equalization. People in egalitarian societies are jealous of excess affluence and do not tolerate its existence for long. Americans have never been anywhere near as egalitarian as the Nordics, but it is striking how their tolerance of opulence has grown over the past two or three decades – with a substantial political push from the people at the top.

Macroeconomic forces also underlie shifts in distribution and growth. One way to think about them is a 'demand-led' growth model proposed by the Cambridge structuralist Nicholas Kaldor in the 1960s. He observed that productivity growth appears to be stimulated by output growth – an idea also raised by Arthur Okun on this side of the Atlantic at about the same time. Going back to Marx and Ricardo – notably the latter's discussion of England's Luddite machine-smashers early in the nineteenth century – rising real wages may also induce firms to seek technologies to save on labor and production costs.

Unit labor costs are reflected in the wage share, which is reduced by higher productivity. Lower costs in turn can stimulate aggregate demand by making capital formation cheaper and national exports more competitive in the world market. Because the nonwage, or profit, share increases when productivity rises relative to real wages, we can say that demand (and output) growth is 'profit-led' under such circumstances. If demand is 'wage-led' on the other hand, higher productivity can displace workers and lead to jobless growth as the Luddites feared. The United States and

countries with similar economies (e.g., the United Kingdom and Japan) appear to be profit-led; wage-led may be the rule on the Continent.

If Kaldor's (or more generally, Keynes's) model applies, there is ample room for demand-side policies to stimulate economic growth. Sensible expansionary monetary and fiscal actions can support demand and thereby stimulate productivity growth through Kaldor-Okun effects. Fiscal deficits may be a consequence, but they need not lead to unacceptably high real rates of interest and inflation. Productivity gains themselves can help keep inflation in check.

If demand is sufficiently profit-led, employment can rise as well. Labor-market interventions such as minimum- and living-wage programs can help maintain the labor share, providing a stabilizing influence against 'excessive' demand stimulation. Enhanced public investment may well 'crowd in' private-capital formation, and help provide vital infrastructure (contrast the United States' broadband coverage at 50-plus percent with South Korea's at 90-plus percent).

Demand-driven models explain other aspects of the macroeconomy – for example, a cycle between demand and distribution as proposed forty years ago by Richard Goodwin, an American economist-artist who found the universities of Cambridge and Siena more congenial than the ones in the United States. At the trough of an output cycle, productivity rises rapidly as the economy emerges from recession, boosting the profit share and demand. Real wages rise (accompanied by inflation) with output as the labor market tightens; cut into profits; and reduce demand at the peak. But any complex system changes its behavior over time. As of summer 2007, we are in a cyclical upswing, and it remains to be

seen whether wage increases will impose their familiar brake on demand expansion. Labor's bargaining power has visibly eroded over recent decades.

A final question is how wage- and profit-led demands fit into the broader economic system. Along classical lines, the Dutch economists Ro Naastepad and Servaas Storm point to a strong institutional complementarity among 'Anglo-American' uncoordinated industrial relations ("flexible labor markets"), a stock market-based financial system placing emphasis on short-term profitability, and a profit-led demand regime. Similarly, a 'Continental' regulated labor market, bank-based financial system, and wage-led demand appear to be complementary.

Both institutional structures have their advantages and disadvantages. In the period since Thatcher and Reagan, political discourse and financial reportage especially have emphasized the adaptability of Anglo-American systems. Slow, jobless growth is allegedly a Continental malaise. While such growth is certainly a possibility in wage-led systems, well-designed policy can sidestep it, as in the Nordic countries with their relatively low unemployment and high growth rates of GDP, productivity, and real wages.

Beyond the cyclical short run, jobless growth is not even contemplated in the model both liberal and conservative policy economists utilize to analyze the United States. Variant versions formulated eighty years ago by the Cambridge polymath Frank Ramsey and thirty years later by MIT's Robert Solow – elegant renditions of the neoclassical Greek chorus – incorporate Say's Law, along with the corollary that the supply of savings exclusively determines investment or capital formation (simply ignoring Keynes's "animal spirits"). Savings in

turn follow from the level of output, set by fully employed labor and capital along with a rate of productivity growth coming from “technological factors” outside the macroeconomic system. Forces of “productivity and thrift” thereby determine macro outcomes.

This model has strong ramifications, two of which served as rationales for the tight fiscal policy pursued by the Clinton administration. First, the theory contends that by absorbing part of the available savings flow, a fiscal deficit will curtail investment and reduce growth. While such an argument might make sense for an externally constrained developing economy, it is irrelevant for the United States, where investment has exceeded saving since the early 1980s and the shortfall offset by borrowing from abroad.

A low deficit also supposedly puts less pressure on financial markets, so that interest rates decline. Keynes debunked this idea decades ago when he observed that returns to assets in thick markets, like the ones for Treasury bonds, are much more likely to be determined by transactions involving the total volume of obligations outstanding rather than by the relatively modest new issues resulting from the current fiscal deficit. In fact, real bond interest rates were at historically high levels leading into and during the fiscally austere Clinton period, and dropped off to very low levels after 2000 when fiscal policy became highly expansionary under Bush. Though driven in part by the Federal Reserve’s actions, these changes were also responses to shifting perceptions of risk and inflation (possibly reversing as of mid-2007) in the bond market. Real saving and investment flows were of secondary importance in this context.

Third, the belief is that because available savings constrains total investment,

public-sector investment will crowd out private capital formation. And if, as is commonly assumed, private economic decisions are ‘more efficient,’ Say’s Law leaves scant room for public-capital formation – even for creating social goods such as human capital.

In a Walrasian world, available supplies of labor and capital, along with the behavioral responses (‘marginal conditions’) generated when firms maximize profits and households maximize utility, set the real wage and the wage share. As I noted earlier, labor-market interventions can have strong effects in demand-led growth models. But under neoclassical growth assumptions, about all they can do is contribute to cost-side inflation and dilute the efficiency of resource allocation by distorting the price system. (In fact, it is not clear that the assumptions really apply. Some recent empirical work suggests that concerns about distortions induced by minimum wages, for example, are likely to be unjustified.)

The inflation angle follows directly from Say’s Law. Full employment of labor is now called a NAIRU (non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment), an acronym only an economist could love. There is a mainstream obsession with policy aimed at the price (or nominal) as opposed to the quantity (or real) side of the economy. Rather than creating jobs or building infrastructure, policy is now directed toward ‘inflation targeting,’ which often implies high interest rates and a strong exchange rate to hold employment below the NAIRU level and reduce the cost of imports as well as support international financial transactions. This combination of ‘macro prices’ is kind to the wealthy and well-connected, but it does little to support processes of production.

Whether the interest of the public at large is served by this policy orientation

with its denigration of government initiatives is an open question. Structuralist, demand-based theories point toward different policy goals within a broader socioeconomic framework. In both poor and rich countries, orthodox policy has not been notably successful for the majority of the world's populations since it came into its heyday during the Thatcher-Reagan period. It is high time to give that old grey mare a chance to rest.

*The flavors
of economics & the
public
interest*

Poem by Molly McQuade

Spring's So Sad, We Want to Know Why

Spring's so sad, we want to know why –
is it the mist that slips us from our baths
with memory of warmth never to be ours?

Beautiful isn't enough, she says,
face floating near a simple oval bowl
flowered beyond whatever we can know,

and likely to outstay the ones who do.
Cornered, somehow, by the bowl, we stare
and wonder how complete we can become,

slipped from likeness on a night of spring,
let alone into a pause of stars,
mass and smallness merging everywhere,

leaving us to sulk and sink in self.
Sweet and simple in its lonesome trust,
spring will keep us simple till we pass.

Molly McQuade's poetry has appeared in numerous publications, including "The Paris Review," "The American Scholar," and "Poetry," as well as in her book "Barbarism" (2000). A new collection of her poems will be published later this year. She has received fellowships and awards from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the National Council of Teachers of English, among others. She has also written a collection of essays about poetry, "Stealing Glimpses" (1999), and edited "By Herself" (2000), an anthology of essays about poetry.

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Fiction by Mary Gordon

Dilly

When I first met Dilly, my husband had just left me. He had left me for another woman, but I didn't know that, not at the time, although it seemed that everyone else knew.

He had a lot of money, my husband, and he satisfied his conscience in regard to me by making sure that I would never have to worry about money – that “my lifestyle wouldn't have to change” as a result of losing him. I forbade him to use the word “lifestyle” again, taking a sharp pleasure in at least forbidding him certain words. “All right,” he said, “I don't want you to have to change your way of life.” I realized then that it meant nothing to him at all that I had made him modify his language, and I felt a fool for my brief moment of false triumph.

Mary Gordon is the author of five novels, including “Final Payments” (1978), “Men and Angels” (1985), and most recently “Pearl” (2005), as well as numerous short stories and poems. Her nonfiction works include “The Shadow Man: A Daughter's Search for her Father” (1996) and “Seeing Through Places: Reflections on Geography and Identity” (2000). She is the recipient of many honors, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Radcliffe Institute Fellowship.

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I was exhausted from fighting a battle that I couldn't win, and that I didn't really care that much about winning: what I cared about was not being perceived to have lost. So I gave up, and I indulged myself by hiring a cleaning woman for our house in the Berkshires, although I was the only one there (our children, my children, were far away – one in California, one in Buenos Aires) and I could easily, in some ways, clean up after myself. But I didn't want to clean up after myself; I wanted someone else to clean up for me. The truth is, I have always been untidy. Tidy people think untidy people are comfortable in their untidiness, and some may be but I was not. My living quarters were important to me, and when they were orderly and clear I was much happier than when they were in disarray; it was simply that keeping them that way was a task I found overwhelming or beyond me, as if someone were asking me to scuba dive without an air tank or a mask.

I told myself that I was making this decision as a sign that I was serious about my writing. I was three-quarters of the way through a novel, and I thought that the best use of my time would be to write compulsively till it was done. The writing would be both a distraction and a satisfaction, and if the book were a suc-

cess, a fuck you to my husband, who had never created anything but capital and who'd claimed to be "really impressed" by my ability to "make things up out of whole cloth."

I found Dilly's name and number in the supermarket. I chose her because her advertisement was entirely business-like and plain. Too many others tried to be witty, and they seemed formally drawn to the interrogative: "Do you love the smell of lavender?" "Don't you have better things to do than clean your house?" Or they had line drawings, probably done by one of their children, of flowers or teddy bears or houses with chimneys producing smoke in the form of a series of conjoined S's. Dilly's advertisement was only straightforward words printed in upper case: "House-cleaning, weekly, monthly, seasonal. Ten years experience cleaning in the area. References available." She was the only one I called.

It was a brilliant August morning when she arrived for her interview. The sky was cobalt and the air smelled of heat, a heat that was warming and delicious now but in a few hours would fall like a curse. The minute she got out of the car, I liked her looks. Is that why I hired her, because I liked her looks? Certainly that had something to do with it. But it wasn't only that I liked her looks, I liked the idea of what her looks suggested.

It occurred to me even then that nobody could not like Dilly's looks. Her frame was lithe; her calves and upper arms were lightly muscled, the muscles rounded, like apples; their roundness and liveliness suggested flexibility rather than strength, and the freckles on her upper arms suggested the kind of speckles on an early apple. She wore her thick red hair pulled back in a long ponytail, using the hair itself as a kind of circlet to

make the tail. She was wearing a flowered sundress, red flowers (I thought they must be nasturtiums) against a background of light cream, and her sandals were made of thin straps, brownish red, and clearly not real leather. Her accent was Massachusetts working class: that and her hair suggested Irishness, and I was pleased with that, since I believed the Irish were well known for being able to get a joke, and that was important to me in anyone I hired.

I showed her around the house and asked her some undemanding questions: there wasn't much to explain and not much for her to assert. I took her references; they were all enthusiastic about her work. "You'll love her," "She's a doll," "A real workhorse," "A lifesaver."

When I had finished speaking to all four people whose names Dilly had given me, I realized that I had just performed a fool's errand. I didn't know the referees; I didn't know anything about them. They could be Dilly's relatives, or they could all be members of a criminal gang who were planning to rob my house and shoot me in my bed. I had no way of knowing. We had lived in the house for two years – or really I had, my husband rarely came. It was meant to be my writing getaway. Later, I understood that while I was in the house he was seeing his mistress in our Beacon Hill apartment. But because I had been quiet and withdrawn and private while I was there, we knew almost no one in the town. The man who mowed the lawn and shoveled the driveway, the plumber, the electrician came and did their work and went. We paid their bills, but that was the end of our relationship. I simply had to take it on faith, that the people whose name Dilly gave me were people of good will, were the people who they said they were: homeowners, people who could afford to hire someone to clean their

house, therefore people of some substance, some dependability, whom people the likes of me, a stranger, could feel free to trust.

Dilly said she could come in ten days; she was about to go on her honeymoon. She was going to the Poconos. I had never known anyone who had gone to the Poconos for a honeymoon, but it was one of those places that somehow everyone knew one fact about: the bathtubs and the beds were heart-shaped. Why it had become the place of a certain kind of person to go on a honeymoon no one ever seemed to question, and it was a history I had no hope of ever finding out. I wrote the question, "Why do people go to the Poconos for honeymoons?" under a heading in my journal, "Information there is no hope of finding out."

On Dilly's first day of work, less than two weeks after we met, she finished her tasks quickly and asked if there was anything else that I'd like done. I said I couldn't think of anything. She looked around and asked if I'd like the birdbath emptied then hosed out. She said birds were quite fussy about clean water, and she'd be glad to do it. I was ashamed that the birds' fastidiousness was something I hadn't known about, or if I'd known it I had cynically or carelessly forgotten it. But when I started to express my embarrassment she said, "No biggie," and laughed. "The birds are fine. I just want you to be popular in the neighborhood."

She said she was particularly partial to the finches, though she had no idea what their song was. "For the life of me I can't tell the sound of one bird from another." And she laughed at her own lack in a way that entirely took away my impulse to educate her; I had been on the point of saying she could buy tapes that would demonstrate the song of each bird, but

instead I laughed and then admitted that I had bought the tapes but found them incomprehensible, and that, although I liked having the birds around, I could only identify four or five species. When I looked in the bird book and thought I'd identified a new one, I would often be chastened by a description like, "Native of Madagascar."

When I gave her a check, she asked if I'd mind making it out to cash; she didn't want to have to pay tax on what I gave her. From that time on, when it was Dilly's day to clean I left a pile of bills on the counter, under a stone whose shape had pleased me when I found it on the Cape with my husband, where we used to go in the summers when the children were young.

She came once a week and often we did tasks together, tasks I'd been wanting to do for years – like alphabetizing the spice rack or making potpourri of the herbs in the herb garden – things that made the house pleasant and fragrant and light in a way that it hadn't been before it had known her touch.

One day that first summer, she called and said her mother wasn't feeling well, and would it be possible for her to bring her kids with her. Just this once. "They're quiet; they know how to mind," she said. I said of course they were very welcome; I went upstairs to the room where, looking forward to future grandparenthood, I kept my children's old books and toys, although my children, both in their early twenties, showed absolutely not one sign between them of the immediate or even near prospect of settling down.

I knew the children's ages: they were five and seven. I had expected that the children would look like her, but I was quite surprised to see that they didn't resemble her in the slightest. They were both blond, and their skin was pale,

Dilly

tending to sallow. The older one, Scott, was large for his age, heavy, not fat, that is not that kind of soft fat like those up-setting boys you can't bear to see in a bathing suit, their overripe pectoral flesh too much a reminder of a misplaced voluptuousness. Scott was wide, with thick but not long legs, like tree trunks, and a broad bull-like chest. He looked very strong. The smaller one, Trevor, was slight, fast, feral. I saw that he would never be fat; I feared he might one day turn brutal. I assumed they looked like their father, but I didn't know who their father was – if he was the person she had just gone to the Poconos with, or someone else – and I understood that I couldn't possibly ask. I wrote, "Is your new husband the father of your children?" in my journal under the heading, "Questions that cannot possibly be asked."

The children had absolutely no interest in any of the books. They were polite children, so they feigned attention for a few minutes, but after a while they began walking around the yard aimlessly, throwing sticks for the dog, who took no interest after one or two attempts, his interest as feigned in sticks as theirs was in my books. "They're not much into reading. Kind of like me," Dilly said. I didn't know what to say to her because there was no way I could pretend that her saying that didn't open up a gulf between us, particularly because she showed absolutely no regret about the state of affairs she was describing. But after a few minutes, the simplicity of her description, and her entire lack of shame about it – as if she were saying to me, your hair is black and mine is red – allowed me to relax, to feel something I had never felt before: that I could like someone, could like them very much indeed, although the written word didn't matter to them at all.

And in fact her competence became essential to me. She could do many things around the house that a man could do; it wasn't that she took the place of my husband, but she made it possible for me to believe I didn't need a husband. She could fix a dripping faucet or a broken shelf or stand on a high ladder. If heavy lifting was required, she had only to dial a number and some large willing male appeared to carry a table upstairs or move an armoire into a spare bedroom. Nothing in the animal kingdom seemed to nonplus her. I called her when I came upon three field mice that had drowned in a bucket of rain water. I couldn't bring myself to deal with it. They seemed so overwhelmed in the bucket, floating, spinning, their paws delicately articulate and their eyes tight shut as if they were sleeping. But their deadness was so complete, so entirely separate from the world of the living, that I couldn't bear to look at them – much less to figure out how they might be disposed of. "No problem," she said, when she'd done whatever it was she did with them. "They're very stupid, mice. They were just looking for a drink. I think they should have found a friendlier bar."

She said this when she was washing her hands, then drying them on the dishtowels she had ironed the week before. She said there were some tasks she actively enjoyed. Ironing was one of them. But what she loved most, she said, was painting rooms, and that if I had any painting projects in mind to please ask her. This encouraged me to look closely at the dingy walls of my study and the downstairs bathroom; together we chose colors, and for a week, she came each day, in paint-covered overalls, and I could hear her singing as she stepped on and off the ladders and ripped masking tape from large blue

rolls. When she had finished painting the bathroom – melon and lime green – and my study – white with a hint of violet and cobalt for the baseboards – we were both so delighted that I asked her out to lunch. She said she'd love it, but she wanted to clean up first. She said a friend of hers had just opened a place that made great soup and salad, and that's how I found the Mountain Breeze café, where I began going every morning to have coffee and homemade muffins and to read *The New York Times*. My mornings changed from a lonely time to a convivial one; and I made friends with a woman there who urged me to join her gym, where I signed up for yoga and Pilates, and met a group of women who all liked each other and began meeting for lunch after every Wednesday's class.

It was only six months after she began working for me, six months after her honeymoon in the Poconos, that her mother called to tell me Dilly couldn't come that day because her husband had just died. She said that if I really needed someone to clean, she'd come and do it. I said no, of course not, Dilly should just call when she was ready to come back. She did call, a week later, and when she came to the door I could see that she had not been altered by her grief as I had feared. I offered my sympathy, and she nodded and said he'd probably been misdiagnosed – he'd probably had some kind of cancer of the blood for a long time. She didn't seem to want to talk about it; she turned from me more quickly than she had at any of our other greetings, and made her way to the broom closet. I didn't know what to say, and her reluctance to give me any information silenced me completely. I didn't know who the husband was, and I never had been able to ascertain whether he was the children's father. She never suggested the tragedy of an early death, and

her mood didn't seem damped in the least. So I didn't feel that I had any right to talk to her about it; I believed it was her tragedy and her right to cope with it any way she liked. Only once did she speak of his illness, and that was with the only sign of bitterness I'd seen in her. She said they were in debt up to their ears because he had a lousy insurance policy that didn't cover a lot of the extras.

It is only now that I understand – now that things will be different, will have to be – how much the changes in my life can be traced to Dilly. After she'd told me about her unpaid medical bills, I was determined to help her in some way that wouldn't be shaming for her. It is probably an exaggeration, but not an enormous one, to say that my decision to move to the town full time was helped along by my desire to do something for Dilly. I figured that if I made her my personal assistant, I could give her more money, and be sure she had steady and pleasant work. It occurred to me that since I really didn't have a full-time job, I didn't need an assistant, but my husband had given me the generous sum he did because he believed I was a working writer. And I thought that if I were going to finish that novel, it would be of great help to me to clear the domestic decks. To give to Dilly the tasks that ate away at my days and irritated me like gnats around the eyes on a summer's evening. Many of the tasks that had fallen to my husband, that I hadn't even noticed he'd habitually done.

So in the fall of 2002, eighteen months after I first met Dilly, I sold my apartment on Beacon Hill and moved to the country full time. I offered Dilly a twenty-hour-a-week job as my personal assistant.

When she agreed, and it seemed to me that she was very pleased, I said we

would have to be very careful to be honest with each other, because resentments could crop up unless we cleared the air quickly whenever either of us was displeased. She said, "You couldn't be more right." But nothing ever did crop up, because Dilly was so expert at anticipating my needs, at picking up my preferences. She told me about her life, but not in a way that suggested that she needed my help. She introduced me into the life of the town, where she'd been born, and that made all the difference.

My children thought my life was taking an alarming turn; they worried that I would become dull and flaccid of mind in the country. My daughter noticed that I wasn't talking so much about writing my novel, that I seemed more focused on local politics, particularly on issues of ecological concern. I only understand now that Dilly had something to do with that too. With what I now think of as the end of my writing life.

Because the last story I wrote was a story about Dilly. And I realized that it was a story I couldn't write. And that it didn't matter to me very much whether the story got written or not. Written, that is, by me. Which is a way of saying, of course, written at all, for it existed only in my mind and if I didn't make something of it, it would simply disappear.

It was a day in late September. Dilly walked in the door in a state I'd never seen her in before. Her face was flushed, and she was clearly agitated.

"I just need to calm down a minute," she said. "I had a talk with Scott's teacher, and I'm really hopping mad."

I told her to sit down; I suggested herbal tea, and she took me up on it. I took some cookies from the top shelf – I leave them there so I'll have to get on the stepladder to reach them. Overeat-

ing is a danger when you live alone; it's a sop against boredom, and I didn't want to reinforce my children's fears about me, that my mind was growing flaccid, by presenting them at Christmas with a flaccid body. And certainly, I didn't want to appear beside my ex-husband's whippet of a new wife as the tired old shoe he'd rejected for a pair of sharp stilettos.

"So she calls me in, she says she wants to talk to me about Scott."

"How old is he now?" I asked.

"He's eight. Now if it was Trevor, I'd have been worried – he can be a hellion – but Scott has been nothing but good since the day he was born. So she says, 'I think Scott has some issues with boundaries.' Now I don't know what the hell she's talking about, some kind of garbage talk that means she doesn't want to come out and say what she has to say. So I ask her what she means, and she says, 'Scott is, as you know, large for his age. And he's a very affectionate little boy. So he shows affection by hugging people. But I think he's hugging too much. And some of the little girls don't seem to like it.'

"Then she says to me, 'Don't get me wrong, he's a great kid, I know he's coping with an overwhelming loss, his father's death and all, but it's just not appropriate to express his needs and feelings in this way.'

"So I just lost it with this one, she's about twenty-five years old, I think she's taught for two years, and I say to her, 'You can call me in if my son is fighting, or cursing, or bringing a gun to school, or selling drugs. You don't tell me there's a problem because he wants to hug people he likes. You're the one with the problem.' And I just slammed the door on her and walked out."

She looked at me for the first time since she'd walked in the door. "You

don't think Scott'll pay because I mouthed off, do you?"

"She sounds like a jerk to me," I said. "I think you were exactly right. You have to be on your son's side, Scott is a great kid, and we can't have a world in which people are afraid to express affection."

"If you ask me, that's why men are so screwed up, because they can't express affection. So I bring my kids up to be affectionate and loving, and they get trashed. I have a good mind to have him switched to another class."

"I think that would be good," I said.

The next week, Dilly was more radiant than ever. She had had Scott switched to the classroom of an older teacher who'd discovered that he really liked math; she was thinking of moving him up into a higher group.

"Thanks for your help," she said.

"I didn't do anything," I said.

"You don't know what you did. You listened. You let me talk. You gave me the time to figure it out for myself. I won't forget it. I owe you one."

Did I take that as a license to turn her encounter into a story? I certainly embellished the truth, filling in all the blanks in Dilly's life that would have come under the category of "Questions that cannot be asked," or "Information there is no hope of finding out."

I had transcribed almost verbatim the words that Dilly had used to tell me about her encounter with Scott's teacher, but after that I invented a scene that answered for me the questions I had never felt free to ask myself about Dilly's sex life.

I looked at the story today; I haven't looked at it for three years. After the encounter with the teacher, I described her pulling out of the school parking lot at breakneck speed in her beat-up green Taurus sedan, and driving with unaccus-

tomized velocity down the highway. I had her consider whether or not to stop at a bar, decide to, order two drinks, consider allowing herself to be picked up, then reject the idea. I had her drive home, her head spinning because she rarely drank, and speak briefly to her mother, who was watching the sleeping children. I took her clothes off and put her into bed. Then I couldn't make up my mind. I wrote two alternate endings. In one, she takes both her children into the bed for comfort. In the other, she resists the temptation, knowing that's the kind of thing that will weaken them, the kind of thing that got Scott into trouble, the kind of thing that as a mother, she must keep her children from. Reading them over now, I still can't decide which one is right.

I couldn't finish the story. I was troubled by the fact that I was writing about Dilly, who was a real person with a real life, but that I was turning her into a fictional character, something unreal. It made me feel vaguely criminal, and the fact that I didn't know what the nature of the crime was – theft, murder, or garden-variety betrayal – made it all the more difficult. I began to worry about what would happen if I ever published it. I knew it was unlikely that Dilly would ever read any of the small journals that were the only places where my stories had appeared, but suppose someone told her? One of the women from the Mountain Breeze, excited by my tiny fame.

I put the story down. It was September of 2004, and I became obsessed with the presidential election. My friends and I – my old friends in Boston, my new friends from yoga and Pilates and the Mountain Breeze café – obsessively consulted the Internet for the latest polls. We made day trips to New Hampshire to garner names for voter registration;

we gave more money than we ever had to the Democratic campaign. I never discussed politics with Dilly, though. I suspected that she didn't care much about politics; I feared what I might discover if I asked. I knew my silence was wise when at Halloween I asked the boys what they were going to be for the holiday. Scott said he was going to be a knight in shining armor; Trevor said he was going to be a soldier, "so I can shoot people in Eye-rack bam bam bam."

After George Bush was elected, I was in despair, and I turned back to my writing, thinking perhaps I should attend to it since the larger world seemed hopeless. I felt that everything I'd based my life on was being called into question; every bad childhood nightmare I thought I had escaped was back to stay. The dream of the sixties seemed only a dream, the dream of my youth: the dream of a new world, the kind of world in which large boys were encouraged to hug when they felt affectionate. And it occurred to me that perhaps these things were even less likely in 2004 than they were when I was a child. In what we thought of as the bad old days. That perhaps, in a time when surveillance is not feared but increasingly desired, it was less likely than it was when I was a child that a boy like Scott would be allowed to hug the people he liked. I was trying to find a way to put this idea into my story, and there was nothing in what I knew that would allow a place for it.

One day, when I was trying to work on the story, I saw Dilly stooping and rising to collect wind-fallen apples, which later I made into apple sauce. That evening the house was fragrant with the scent of apples and cinnamon, and I knew this was because of her.

All that fall, I tried to finish the story and I couldn't. I allowed myself to fol-

low the impulse for pure description. I allowed myself to describe sunsets, which I knew were the most obvious things for someone to want to describe. I spent a lot of time watching the sun set from my study window, which faces west. I wanted to write about sunsets, because I knew that watching sunsets was something Dilly would like, something she might do with her children, something the four of us might all enjoy, might even enjoy together. I wrote the descriptions in my journal. I no longer keep a journal. It's odd to open the old one now, but I feel the need to call up that time, that time which has something to do with all the things related to Dilly that I am now trying to understand. I read the words I wrote two years ago:

It was that winter that I got involved in the Preservation Society. I went to the first meeting after my friend Laura, whom I'd met at the Mountain Breeze café and talked into joining me for Pilates, had told me I had to get over my political despair and the best way was to get involved in local issues, where there was at least some chance of making an impact.

The fact that I couldn't finish the story about Dilly seemed like some sort of sign. I didn't believe that anything I could write was worth even the chance of hurting Dilly. And I thought that meant I wasn't a real writer, that my need to write wasn't as strong as I'd thought it was, as I'd convinced my ex-husband it was. I decided to put my novel aside and concentrate on the project to save the wetlands from greedy developers.

The Preservation Society became the center of my life. The meetings led to social events: suddenly I was invited to dinners, and was giving them. I became

interested in gardening, and since then have had a satisfactory and entirely unbinding affair with the man who owns the best of our many local nurseries. Because of him I've taken up hiking and birding, and it makes the environmental issues that we work for so real to me that they pierce my heart, as if in contemplating the prospect of the degradation of this natural beauty I were contemplating the corruption or loss of a beloved child.

There seemed to be an endless series of issues needing our attention, and I became more proficient on the computer: creating graphics for our flyers and expanding our database. I taught Dilly some computer skills, which she hadn't had before, but which she picked up very quickly. When I suggested she take some computer courses at the community college, she told me one thing she had no interest in was any more school. "The last thing I need is more pressure. No thanks," she said. She could be firm in her refusals, and even when I thought they were unwise, I saw a greater un wisdom in trying to oppose her. There was the time when she told me Scott hadn't done so well in school, and the teacher was demanding that he read three books and write three book reports over the summer to make up his deficiencies. I offered to help. Dilly said, "No, thanks, he needs to learn to do things on his own. He's a real procrastinator. A real buck-passer. Now math, he's all over it. Give him math to do he'll sit on his behind for hours on end. But anything with words, it just bores him and he won't put his mind to it. He's got to break through that himself."

"I'm available any time," I said, but we both knew she wouldn't take me up on it.

Last spring, the Preservation Society got wind of a plan to build a Wal-Mart on the site of what used to be a dairy farm three miles from the interstate exit for our town. The Conservancy went into high gear; this was something we could rally the local population about. We were right that people wouldn't want the traffic and the eyesore of a big box ruining our landscape. We knew there'd be opposition: we were a depressed area and people needed jobs, but we weren't ready for the obviousness and radicalness of the split. Middle-class people didn't want the Wal-Mart, working-class people did.

We tried to have meetings that would make it clear to the people who supported Wal-Mart that in the long run it would be a bad idea for them; Wal-Mart drove out small businesses, and the jobs were lousy and exploitative. I was given the particular task of trying to formulate language that wouldn't be class-inflected and therefore alienating.

I tried to talk to Dilly about it, but she put her hands over her ears and said, "Oh, Eve, you know it's not the kind of thing I can get my brain around." I gave her more and more hours doing things like picking up Xeroxing and taking prospectuses to the sign makers. She said she was glad of the extra money; her kids seemed to grow out of their clothes before they grew into them.

At the very time when I needed her most, when we were preparing for the vote in the town council that would determine whether the formerly farmed area would be rezoned commercially, Dilly came to work more delighted than I'd ever seen her.

"You'll never guess, Eve. Maybe my luck's changing, I never win anything. But my friend, Betsey, she worked for one of those pyramid schemes, selling

fire extinguishers, and if you let her do a demonstration in your house and wrote up a form saying you'd seen all the stuff and bought one (which I did, we needed a fire extinguisher, I'd never even thought of one), and you mailed it in, I mean the questionnaire, if you did that you were eligible for a raffle to win a trip to Disney World. A whole week, all expenses paid. Do you believe it? I won. Me. So the kids and I are going, in two weeks. It's the dream of a lifetime."

I was upset; Dilly's help had never been more crucial. Her connection to all the local merchants and laboring men was vital to our getting the word out. But what could I say? She looked so happy. It wasn't like her not to consider how she might be inconveniencing me. At the same time as I was hurt by it, I was glad for her. She'd never had the luxury of heedlessness, and I was glad to see her don it, like a silly hat or too-high heels. She said her mother would be glad to pitch in if I needed help. I said that I'd love it if she could just do a day's housework; I was up to my neck in political stuff. She said her mother made her look sick as a cleaner, I'd be really impressed. I agreed to have her mother come for one day the following week.

I'd never met Dilly's mother; I'd only talked to her once when she phoned to say Dilly's husband had died. I was surprised when I saw her: I suppose I expected some of Dilly's liteness, her goldness or rosinness, but her mother was heavy in every way that it was possible to be. She was overweight, but that wasn't the most important thing about her heaviness. It was her tread; every step she took seemed like a complaint or a reproach, and although it was late August, and she was wearing khaki shorts, she wore heavy grey wool socks with her tan Reeboks, and they made

my feet feel sweaty and oppressed. She sighed with every item she picked up, and I felt ashamed for everything about my domestic life. She moved the furniture vengefully as she vacuumed in places I wouldn't even know how to name. She refused to use the geranium-scented cleaner I preferred to 409: she said she'd bought some new cleaners for her kitchen and bathroom, and she swore by them, and she wasn't going to use anything else. I didn't feel I had the right to disagree.

I was working in my study when she knocked on the door. Her face was red; her breathing was labored. I thought she was going to tell me she'd had a heart attack. "I found this in the garbage," she said. She opened her closed fist and threw a twenty-dollar bill on the desk.

"Oh, my goodness," I said, in a voice so girlish and abashed I could hardly recognize it. "I can't imagine how it got there." I was telling the truth, I couldn't imagine how twenty dollars had fallen into the wastebasket – I could only guess that it had happened when I was trying to clean out my exercise bag after a bottle of foundation had spilled into it. I was hot with shame, as if Dilly's mother had uncovered something unspeakable, and I thought about the connection between money and shit. And suddenly I didn't understand what had happened because I didn't understand what money was: was it shit or gold, the most desirable thing in the world or the thing that must be hidden, never spoken of. And I was ashamed because of my lack of understanding, and the dishonesty that underlay it – and I was frightened, as Marie Antoinette must have been frightened when she heard herself saying, "Let them eat cake." Perhaps the moment she said it she knew that she'd be led to the guillotine, and that the people who led her there would be right to do it.

“You can’t imagine it. I’ll bet you can’t. Well, I can imagine it,” she said. “I can imagine it very well. You have so much money you can throw it away. Twenty dollars means nothing to you. Nothing. You think money is nothing. You think it’s garbage. You don’t even think about it. Do you know what it would mean to Dilly? It might mean she could buy herself some new clothes or go to the beauty parlor. Or maybe even the dentist. She takes her kids to the dentist, but she can’t afford to go herself. Last year she got a tooth pulled because she couldn’t afford a root canal. I don’t suppose you knew about that, did you. I don’t suppose you ever noticed that gap in the back of her mouth when she laughs hard or smiles wide. No, you wouldn’t. You and your fancy friends. Trying to keep the Wal-Mart away. If the Wal-Mart was there, maybe my Dilly could get a real job. Something that would lead to something. Instead of working for you and your fancy friends. What’s going to happen to her when she gets old? Are you going to take care of her? She won’t even have Social Security. But no, she likes you and your nice ways and your nice things, and that you talk nice to her and take her out to lunch on her birthday. But it’s no good for her. You’re spoiling her. You’re spoiling her just like you’ve been spoiled. But she won’t stand for it forever. She’ll leave you flat one day, just as soon as she gets a little sense.”

“But I thought she wanted it that way, my paying her under the table . . . I thought it was better for her.”

“It would have been better for her if she’d never met you. She might get a regular job in a normal place where she could meet people her own age, maybe somebody she could go out with on a normal date or something.”

She pushed past me and took the twenty-dollar bill off the desk. She ripped it in half, then in four pieces, then eight, and then sixteen. She dropped it onto my desk so the pieces fell onto my computer keyboard. Then she walked out the door.

I sat with my head in my hands, as if I’d just been shot. I must have been sitting that way when the telephone rang. It was Dilly’s mother. “Look, Mrs. Harrison, I’m sorry. Don’t pay any attention to what I said. I get that way sometimes. I think it’s my time of life, you know what I mean. I mean, we’re about the same time of life, so I’m sure you understand. I just go off my head sometimes, and I say things, I don’t even mean them. Dilly’d be real freaked out if she knew what I did. I have to ask you as a favor, as a mother you have to understand, just to keep this between ourselves.”

“Of course,” I said.

“It’s just that I worry about her so much, I always have. She’s not like other people. She’s not like my other kids; she’s my youngest, and I guess we spoiled her, or her father spoiled her, God knows I always tried. ‘Life isn’t a dream, Dilly,’ I was always saying to her. She wanted some kind of life that was only a dream. And then she saw your life, with all your nice things; she loves nice things, she always did, we used to call her Lady Day, and sometimes we’d turn it into ‘Lah-di dah’ when we felt she wasn’t pulling her weight. You could never make her do anything on time, and she liked that about your life: ‘Eve never seems to be in a rush.’ Well, time is money I said to her, and that’s what you don’t have. You see, she isn’t strong. Any kind of pressure does her in. ‘I can’t stand the stress,’ she says that so much, she puts her hands over her ears like someone’s shouting at her. No one’s

shouting at you Dilly, I say, take your hands away from your ears. It's why she didn't go to college. She thinks it's so great. That you never seem to be in any rush to do anything. She thinks it's a real life, what you have. But it isn't. Not for her. It's just a dream, a dream that will keep her from waking up. 'Wake up, Dilly, life is real,' I always used to say that to her. She's got to toughen up. And I don't see it happening. Don't tell her I said any of this to you. She'd die a thousand deaths."

"I wouldn't say anything to Dilly," I said.

"I owe you one," Dilly's mother said, and hung up the phone.

I sat at my desk for half an hour, not knowing what to think or what to do. There was a meeting of the committee that night, and I called my friend Laura and said I was under the weather. Laura was upset: "You can't afford to be under the weather right now. Every day counts." I said I'd be back on board tomorrow.

It's tomorrow now; tomorrow is today and Dilly is home from Orlando. What will I say to her when I see her?

All I can think of are the things I can't say. All the questions I can't ask. Do you think you'd be better off working at Wal-Mart? Do you understand that the wages are terrible and that they cheat you out of benefits? Do you want me to report your income so you can be eligible for Social Security? Do you want me to pay for your health insurance? Do you want me to pay for you to go to the dentist? Do you want half my money?

That's what I really want to say. I want to say, Dilly, I have more than enough money and you don't have enough. Let's share. Let's share until we have exactly the same amount of money, and if I have to work harder to make ends meet, that

will only be fair. And then, when we have the same amount of money, we can talk about the environment and the war and the way the world should be. And until we do, there is nothing we can say to each other. Because otherwise everything is a lie. Or as your mother says, a dream.

And I realized how many of the things that come under the heading, "Things that cannot be talked about," or "Questions that cannot be asked," were about money. That, even more than sex, money was the thing we feared to mention, that could cause ruptures in a friendship that could never be repaired. And I felt very stupid that I hadn't understood that in my life ever before.

Am I bad for you, Dilly, I want to say, when she comes up the path. Was meeting me a bad thing for your life? Should I send you away to make your life better?

She is carrying a plastic bag covered with the images of Disney characters: Mickey, Minnie, Goofy, Donald Duck. "I brought you something – it was the only thing in Disney World I thought you wouldn't hate," she says. She's brought me two pounds of Kona coffee, which smells intoxicating, even through the plastic.

"How was your holiday, Dilly?"

"It was great, but it was stressful. I'm so glad to be home." She looks around my kitchen and opens up her arms. She smiles one of her wonderful smiles. She puts her hand on my forearm. Her hand is warm and firm and slightly but pleasantly damp. "You know, Eve," she says, "I just can't wait to get back to work."

Dialogue between Cornel West & D. Graham Burnett

Metaphysics, money & the Messiah: a conversation about Melville's "The Confidence-Man"

Reality used to be a friend of mine . . .

– P.M. Dawn

Editor's note: This spring, the Princeton historian D. Graham Burnett sat down with his colleague Cornel West to discuss their responses to a quintessentially American parable, "The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade," the last long-form work of prose fiction by Herman Melville (1819 – 1891). This strange tale of performance, deception, and sudden intimacies is built out of a sequence of glancing encounters among the passengers of a Mississippi riverboat bound for New Orleans. Who is who in the story is never quite clear, and when money changes hands (as it often does), there are usually reasons for concern – not least because of the shadowy presence of the title character, whose rosy promises entrance even the cautious. Set on April Fool's Day (and published on April 1, 1857), "The Confidence-Man" – though a critical and commercial disaster at the time – has now puzzled, beguiled, and inspired Melville readers for a century and a half.

Cornel West, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1999, is Class of 1943 University Professor at Princeton University. His published works include "Race Matters" (1993), "The Future of the Race" (with Henry Louis Gates Jr., 1997), and "Democracy Matters" (2004). West recently released a new album, "Never Forget: A Journey of Revelations."

D. Graham Burnett is an associate professor of history at Princeton University. He is the author of "Masters of All They Surveyed" (2000), "A Trial By Jury" (2001), "Descartes and the Hyperbolic Quest" (2005), and "Trying Leviathan" (2007).

D. GRAHAM BURNETT: Cornel, it feels like a good time to have a serious conversation about a difficult text. And I figured we could dig right in, since it is a premise of Melville's *The Confidence-Man* that here in the United States perfect strangers can walk right up to each other and start on a serious conversation.

CORNEL WEST: We're hardly strangers, though, brother Graham.

DGB: So true – it is almost twenty years now since I sat as a sophomore in your course on "Cultural Criticism," weeping like a baby, along with about three hundred other impressionable youths, at

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your lecture on the death of Socrates. Many years gone by, and now our offices are a hundred yards apart. Even so, it is a conceit of this book that in some sense we are *all* fundamentally strangers, no?

CW: That's right, that's true.

DGB: So let's dive in, and start with a scene that sets the stage for everything that follows, namely, the introduction of the character called 'Black Guinea.' You will remember that Melville offers us the pathetic picture of an apparently crippled Black beggar pleading for alms aboard the Mississippi steamer, *Fidèle*, where all the action of the novel will unfold. Guinea and a "purple-faced drover" strike up a conversation. And the drover asks the supplicant, "But where do you live?" And Guinea replies, "All 'long shore, sar; dough now I'se going to see brodder at der landing; but chiefly I libs in der city." And the drover replies, "St. Louis, ah? Where do you sleep there of nights?" and Black Guinea replies, "On der floor of der good baker's oven, ser." And the drover replies, "In an oven? Whose, pray? What baker, I should like to know, bakes such black bread in his oven, alongside of his nice white rolls, too. Who is that too charitable baker, pray?" "Dar he be," replies Black Guinea, "with a broad grin lifting his tambourine high over his head." "The sun is the baker, eh?" replies the drover, a supposition Guinea confirms: "Yes sar, in der city dat good baker warms der stones for dis ole darkie when he sleeps out on der pabements o' nights."

What's going on here? I'm not sure, but I propose that we consider this curious exchange in light of the following excerpt from Aristotle's *Parts of Animals*, famously cited in Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*:

We are told about something Heraclitus said to visitors who wanted to get to see him. Approaching, they found him warming himself in an oven. Surprised, they stood there in consternation – above all because he encouraged them to come in without fear, saying: "Even here the gods are present."¹

Now the juxtaposition may seem a little far-fetched, but Heraclitus is mentioned by name in *The Confidence-Man*, so we know that Melville is engaged with this character, and the circumstantial consonances in the scenes are not trivial. Moreover that last line – "even here the gods are present," "*einai gar kai entautha theous*" – resonates in a powerful way with the larger themes of this novel. Indeed, I want to suggest that this tagline – here tacitly cited, we might say, by Melville – amounts to an antithesis of the traditional trope *et in arcadia ego* . . .

CW: Even here in the garden the devil is present . . .

DGB: Right. And as you know, the dominant thread of twentieth-century criticism of *The Confidence-Man* reads the story's central figure – the shape-changing huckster-demiurge who promenades through this 'masquerade' in different incarnations, selling dreams and preaching hope – as a Satanic presence. Black Guinea would appear to be the first of

1 For an account of the translation problems this passage offers, as well as a comprehensive discussion of interpretations of its significance, see Pavel Gregoric, "The Heraclitus Anecdote: *De Partibus Animalium* i 5.645a17 – 23," *Ancient Philosophy* 21 (2001): 73 – 85. Gregoric joins the preponderance of modern commentators in rejecting Heidegger's glossing of "*pros tōi ipnōi*" as 'in the oven,' preferring 'at' or 'by'; admittedly, these latter were also preferred by Aristotle's early-nineteenth-century English translators.

these incarnations, as well as the point of departure for the whole tale: his invocation of a list of “good, kind, honest ge’mmen” who will vouch for his *bona fides* becomes the roster of con men (or, perhaps more precisely, the roster of disguises for Black Guinea himself) we will encounter in the pages that follow.

But against this diabolical reading I offer the Heraclitan apothegm: “Even here the gods are present.” Even here, as in ‘even in this broken black body’; even here, as in ‘even here in the heart of the Americas.’ I would like to believe that at this moment Melville is self-consciously offering us this lowly figure as a kind of profound metaphysician, and asking us already, from the outset, to be worried about our inability to see philosophical profundity where we least expect it. At the same time, I see Melville staking a claim to America as a place for philosophy and theology, not merely a place for commerce and wilderness – even here, the gods are present, even here on a riverboat in the muddy middle stretches of the Mississippi.

The most radical claim, then, would be that this Heraclitan invocation of Black Guinea signals the high ambition of the text: to serve as the evangel of a distinctively American metaphysical posture. This is a book about what America offers to the problems of thought and being: space, movement, destabilized social hierarchies, perpetual and sequential opportunities for self-invention. At one point, in an irruption of authorial voice, Melville writes that there are only a handful of ‘original’ characters in all of literature: original like a Hamlet, or a Don Quixote. And yet it is clear that the confidence-man is such a character – our autochthonous philosophical persona. America itself is the condition of possibility for this figure.

CW: It’s a fascinating reading. I mean right off we have to keep in mind that Melville has a history of using Black characters as a way of concealing an existential profundity *vis-à-vis* supposedly sophisticated society. You think right away of Pip, for example, in *Moby-Dick*. And when Sterling Stucky talks about the crucial role of Black characters and Black culture in Melville, he makes you think of the Black church at the very beginning of *Moby-Dick* that becomes a kind of prefiguration of that blackness of blackness that Melville is going to be wrestling with in the novel as a whole.

This is the grand Melville saying, ‘Well, let’s look at those on the *underside* of American civilization, the Pips and the Black Guineas, who not only have much to say, but have a power of disclosing and revealing a certain kind of shallowness and hollowness at the heart of a civilization that claims to be thick with plenitude and girded with certainty.’

But when you point to this business with Black Guinea and the oven, the stove, you get me thinking of Descartes as a *stove* philosopher: Descartes in Germany at his stove, wrestling with skepticism, wrestling with doubt – this is a figure who is dealing with the grounds of confidence, the problem that lies at the center of Melville’s text.

See, I think it’s key to read *The Confidence-Man* against two other literary texts in American culture: *Miss Lonelyhearts*, by Nathanael West; and Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh*. I think of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, where you get the hero/antihero who comes in and reveals that we have no grounds for our confidence in the world – not in the arts, not even in religion. He becomes a Christ figure who is simultaneously, in a sense, an Antichrist. He is not the devil, exactly, but he is a kind of veiled figure, a Christ

in disguise who is unable to *deliver* like the traditional Christ figure *delivered*.

Similarly so with that extraordinary character Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh*. Hickey too is a kind of problematic Christ figure – not simply an Antichrist, but really a Christ who can't deliver, a Christ who sells dreams. But it is even stranger than that: he sells the death of dreams too. He sells confidence but spawns a lack of confidence. He sows hope and transformation, but in the end he spawns radical distrust, even destruction.

These figures, these prophets of the pipe-dream, are deeply rooted not just in Melville as a whole, but particularly in this text.

Now another way of talking about all this is to look to Luke 18:8, and that famous question, "When the son of man comes will he find *faith on earth*?" Now by "faith" here we're not talking about just faith in God – we're talking about the fiducial constitution of our existence, the fiduciary dimension of the human condition. The kind of thing Michael Polanyi talked about with great insight in *Personal Knowledge* back in 1958.

DGB: I'm struck by your reference to the fundamental preoccupation with faith in this text. It has seemed to me at different moments that *The Confidence-Man* might plausibly be read against Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* in the following way: Melville is acutely aware of the necessity of using distrust as a method for the production of knowledge – "I have confidence in distrust" or "I have trust in distrust," his characters say, parroting the stove philosopher himself – and yet this text seems steeped in the awareness that knowledge itself cannot save us.

CW: Yes, that's right, to be sure.

DGB: And so I think of Kierkegaard, who wants us to begin by remembering that belief – faith – is *not* knowledge, that there is a condition of "waiting to have revelation of what was in fact the case," and that's the experience of our lives. We *do not know* what follows our immediate perceptual existence, and it is *only once we know* what follows that the life we have lived can be understood under its proper aspect, under the aspect of eternity. This is the central problem of the small volume Kierkegaard published in the same year as *Fear and Trembling*: the book called *On Repetition*. So we are cursed, required, to live in this suspended state, without knowledge of that which is determinative of our condition. Can Melville's text be read as an account of the necessity of faith in a Kierkegaardian, or existential, mode?

CW: Yes, you're right on the mark in terms of shifting from the more Cartesian conception of 'epistemology' to the more existential conceptions of what the great H. Richard Niebuhr, the finest American theological mind of the twentieth century, called "pistology" in his posthumous volume *Faith on Earth*. By pistology he means this existential belief you are talking about, the business of trying to find some kind of meaning in a world of overwhelming chaos, in the world that Samuel Beckett calls "the mess." Pistology means imposing some order on *the mess*.

Now take that wonderful line about Melville in Hawthorne's diary entry of November 20, 1856: "He can neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief." That says a great deal. Here's Melville contemplating annihilation; he's wrestling to find some meaning – now, here.

This is an existential struggle; this isn't an epistemological problem in the more technical sense used by our colleagues over in the philosophy department. This is a Kierkegaardian struggle, to be sure. We are in the realm of *pistology* here, since what H. Richard Niebuhr had in mind is that Greek word *pistis*, a term in the Koine Greek of the New Testament that usually gets translated 'faith.' Pistology has to do with self-involved, self-invested, self-immersed conceptions of belief. It is what William James talks about in *The Will to Believe*: you're actually putting your *life at stake*, you're on the edge of the abyss, you're trying to find some meaning that sustains you in your trajectory from womb to tomb. So this is existential in the deepest sense.

DGB: And if we ask 'what's the difference between faith and confidence?' we get – etymologically speaking – just that little particle at the front end, 'con,' which has come to mean deception, but has a prior sense of 'with or among.' In that latter sense at least, though perhaps in both, we catch a glimpse of the desire for each other – the spiritual and material need for each other, the appetite for each other – that is so important to this book.

CW: Absolutely. We are hungry for cultivated fellowship. This is a book about *paideia*, but it is a book that is uneasy about that too – in every 'con' there's a little 'con,' if you know what I mean!

DGB: Let's talk about Emerson for a moment. Emerson is one of your heroes, but Melville can be read to offer a pretty damning indictment of the Sage of Concord.

CW: Yes, well, as we know, Melville stood in a very complicated relationship to Emerson. We know from the letters that he characterized him as a great man – as a *diver*, as a man who could *dive*. Melville said you can always see something in a man when he goes beyond mediocrity, when he goes beyond easily discernible qualities, and Herman Melville saw that in Ralph Waldo Emerson. On the other hand, though, maybe Waldo's just a Plato who talked through his nose. That is to say, maybe in the end he's someone who really didn't have an understanding of the depth of the darkness of the human condition – he refused to linger on the darkness. It's like Goethe's relation to Von Kleist, you know: "I don't want to deal with the darkness too long; I'm going to push the fearsome text aside, and move toward the cloudless sky."

DGB: So what about the part of *The Confidence-Man* that has been interpreted as directly satirical of Emerson and Thoreau both, namely, the encounter between the protean 'cosmopolitan' and these two bizarre characters: the 'mystic' Mark Winsome (usually read as Emerson) and his 'practical disciple' Egbert (usually read as Thoreau). The subject of their encounter is – as always in *The Confidence-Man* – money.

CW: Part of the genius of Melville is that he understood William James's insight: that the core of the religious and existential problem for human beings is the *call for help*. It's no accident that *Miss Lonelyhearts* begins with that call: the Christ figure there has to answer all these terrible anonymous letters written to the newspaper, where people bare their hearts and cry out in their pain – there is the girl with no nose, there is the

victim of sexual abuse, and on and on. A suffering humanity, calling for help: that is who we are.

It is clear that Melville understood a certain version – yes, maybe a dominant version – of Emerson’s conception of ‘self-reliance’ as ultimately a philosophy that didn’t allow persons authentically to call for help. On this view human beings were autonomous enough, self-sufficient enough, to make their way.

We know that Melville couldn’t accept the dogmatic and orthodox Christian conception of that call for help, and of the obligation to respond. But he nevertheless believed that the call was real, that it was inescapable, and that a reply was indispensable. In his view anybody who plans to fly from cradle to grave without ever calling for help – at the most profound level – is somebody who is deeply confused, somebody whose philosophy has a gaping hole in the middle, a hole in its *soul*. And so Winsome ends up being this surface-like figure.

Yes, for sure, it’s an indictment of Emerson, but we have to keep in mind that Melville also had some appreciation of the real Emerson, so we don’t want to confuse Winsome with Emerson himself. In the end Melville’s argument is that Emersonian confidence in ‘self-reliance’ is too easily earned, that this solipsistic trust is too lightly assumed, too glibly presupposed. It skipped the struggle and the call for help that Melville understood to be at the core of the human experience.

DGB: You make the call for help sound like a dark night of the soul, but in *The Confidence-Man* that call often bleats from the dark night of the wallet. What about the money? You remember that when Winsome introduces his disciple Egbert, we get this strange line: Win-

some says, “For to every philosophy there are certain rear parts, very important parts, and these, like the rear of one’s head, are best seen by reflection.”

Yes, there’s something scatological about this, as critics have been quick to point out, but I want to argue that ultimately in this text the ‘rear part’ of philosophy is money. Cornel, you know the expression ‘money-shot’?

CW: Yes I do.

DGB: Well we might say that what Melville does to Emersonian transcendentalism is hoist it in front of the camera for its money-shot. And the money-shot is a tight shot on an open wallet. My sexualized term isn’t gratuitous. It’s explicit in the ‘hypothetical’ disputation between the cosmopolitan and Egbert in this same scene: the cosmopolitan says (it’s the refrain of the whole novel), “I am in want – urgent want of money,” to which Egbert replies dismissively that to call for a loan on the basis of friendship is “in platonic love to demand love rites.”

So we come to the metaphysical money-shot: ‘I know that you have a great deal to say about God, and Jesus, and Love, and Truth, but here is the thing: I’m in want, I’m in urgent want, of *a hundred dollars*.’ At this point it doesn’t matter what book is on the table, what vast pronouncement is on the lips, what Buddha or Mahatma or carpenter’s son is at the front of the room – we are going to see the philosophy in *action*.

I take it to be a lemma of *The Confidence-Man* that you should never have a prophet or a guru or a priest or a savior to whom you have not owed actual money. When you see a promising messianic candidate on the horizon, you have to walk right up and ask to borrow *one hundred dollars*, by way of opening overture.

CW: That's a fascinating read. But I've got a different take on all this. You remember at the end of Vico's *The New Science*, where he says that one cannot be a wise man without piety, that piety is a precondition of wisdom? By piety he means what Plato is talking about in the *Euthyphro*, which is indebtedness to the sources of good in one's life. So piety really means acknowledging what was in place or antecedent to you as you made your entrée and as you attempt to sustain yourself.

Another way of putting it is this: when Melville writes, "to every philosophy there are certain rear parts," I am thinking of Heidegger, and of the implicit background conditions that are tacitly presupposed in any philosophical articulation or expression. Gadamer has made much of this. Polanyi also has made much of this, in terms of the tacit dimension of epistemic claims. It goes all the way to Edmund Burke, where prejudices are actually positive things, the very things that enable us to make the kind of knowledge claims that we make. These background conditions have to be made explicit by means of serious interrogation, reflection, and so forth, and therefore there's no such thing as a legitimate autonomy independent of a piety – a piety that must be enacted; there's no such thing as a legitimate autonomy independent of an acknowledgement of that which came before. Charles Taylor, of course, has offered profound insights in this regard, and Rorty and others have picked it up.

If all this is true, then it means that some kind of historicist sensibility – in the form of a pietistic invocation or acknowledgement of what was in place prior to any kind of philosophical claim – cannot be avoided. This means that philosophy becomes tied to history, society, tradition, the existential condition

of the author, and even biographical details – so we are back with Melville, terrified of financial ruin, wrestling with death, and struggling with his complex relations to his father . . .

DGB: So let's fit that back with what we were saying earlier about the limits of knowledge. I said before that this text knows knowledge cannot save us. And so we drew out Descartes and Kierkegaard, and suggested that *The Confidence-Man* understands the problem: 'OK, there are certain moves that you can make to try your claims to truth using radical doubt, skepticism, and so forth, but when you are finished razing the castles of deception, you are still going to need ground under your feet, and a roof over your head.' This is the foundational problem, and it remains a problem of belief. Are the 'hinder parts of a philosophy' legible as the problem of belief?

CW: Well, the real question is whether Melville believes *anything* can save us. Can belief really save us? What if your life preserver doesn't float? Melville might be precluding any sources of salvation here, and this is where the issue of the godhead becomes important. Remember that one line, brother, where he talks about maybe the devil understands who we are better than the creator does? It jumps out . . .

DGB: It's chapter 22, "Tusculan Disputations," toward the end. And the line is – what an amazing line! – I'll read it: "The devil is very sagacious. To judge by the event, he appears to have understood man better even than the Being who made him."

CW: Yes, that's the one!

DGB: Being with a capital B? I hadn't noticed that. Talk about a Heideggerian moment ...

CW: Reminds me a little bit of Schelling's great essay of 1809 on the essence of human freedom, where the very godhead itself becomes the center of a civil war between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. It's a poetic text, and it has to do with whether the Satanic forces are actually more insightful regarding who we are as human beings than the being who supposedly created Lucifer himself. So you get this battle in the godhead, and this is part of the problem of evil. You know Heidegger has great lectures on this, the lectures shortly after he left the Nazis, in the summer of 1936 at Freiburg, where he says that Schelling is the greatest philosopher of the nineteenth century – other than Nietzsche, of course.

DGB: This goes beyond a traditional story of Manicheism, where the issue is mere strength. The issue here is something much stranger: it's a Manicheism of savvy, of intimacy, of even something like sympathy. Terrifying!

You put me in mind of the apocalyptic conclusion of this book, where, by the sputtering light of that histrionically allegorical “solar lamp” – with its two sides, one showing a “horned altar, from which flames arose,” the other “the figure of a robed man, his head encircled by a halo” – our possibly diabolical cosmopolitan leads the doddering, white-haired, Bible-reading father figure into the labyrinth of scriptural apocrypha before whisking him off the stage and into the darkness. This is worrisome, to be sure!

CW: So you admit to the diabolism now!

DGB: It's worrisome, I can't lie. And yet I am still resistant to interpreting the scene as a victory for the powers of darkness. I see the extinction of the solar lamp as the extinction of the whole business of truth and falsehood, the extinction of the adolescent preoccupation with epistemology, with the ‘really-real’ and how we know it. We are being led – to invoke Nietzsche – out of the ‘bad air’ of a cabined theology into a perfectly perspectival universe – and being led by a new kind of savior: the player, the silver-tongued belief-maker, the tambourine man of dreams. We could do a lot worse! This is no descent into blasphemous despair. Ultimately, the text presents a powerful account of faith: genuinely prohibit any gesture toward ontological fundamentals, and you have changed the game; cling to your faith right up to the moment you die, and *you have made it*. There is no place from which the rightness or wrongness of your view can be assessed. The notion of your ‘wrongness’ trades on an implicit – and formally illegitimate – God's-eye view.

CW: That is too rosy, brother – too rosy. The text is so fundamentally open-ended. It isn't going to save conventional Christianity for you. After all, even when you wander out into this new world, you're still in the hold of a ship of fools – and this takes us back to Sebastian Brandt's great work of 1494, *Das Narrenschiff*. Melville is deeper than Nietzsche here. Perspectival? Brother Nietzsche closed a lot of questions. He was nothing if not sure about many answers ...

DGB: Christianity's wrong, Judaism's wrong, Democracy's wrong, science is wrong ...

CW: And Melville is deeper than that. There is a level of existential interrogation here, and a Socratic questioning that keeps things open. Which doesn't mean the text is unreadable. I don't like it when the critics say it's unreadable; I think it's very readable. There is play here, but it's not a Derridean free play, because it is too earnest and serious to be Derridean. And in fact the comedy has difficulty surfacing. We get it at the very end, with the laughing of the little flame-colored boy in the last chapter, but the laughter is so tear-soaked and hard-earned that it is very different from what we associate with deconstructionist readings, it seems to me. This is certainly not just about language or textuality; this is really all about the humanist notion of the soul, and the heart, and our tragic choices. Melville recognizes the price you have to pay for each option you chose, and isn't that the truth?

DGB: You have to pay to play, the cosmopolitan might say. Are we back to money, the fundamentally transactional character of the call for help?

CW: Do you remember that wonderful line in *Miss Lonelyhearts* when Nathaniel West says something like, "The commercial spirit is the father of lies"? There's always a whiff of death when we talk about lies and mendacity, so you get this existential connection with the economic, just as we have the link between epistemology and the state of one's soul. Yes, this is all a kind of Socratic questioning, an open investigation of what it means to be human – but at the same time you're right that there is something very American here, in terms of the ubiquitous character of market relations and business transactions.

DGB: What about truth? Melville puts in the mouth of a forbidding character – the 'ursine' Missourian, clad in skins – one of the most memorable lines of the whole book:

[W]ith some minds truth is, in effect, not so cruel a thing after all, seeing that, like a loaded pistol found by poor devils of savages, it raises more wonder than terror – its peculiar virtue being unguessed, unless, indeed, by indiscreet handling, it should happen to go off of itself.

This image is a notch more complicated than the later business about truth as a 'thrashing-machine.' *That* we get: truth is dangerous, but used correctly, it feeds us – it's a tool. Much more unsettling is this business about the loaded gun. Because what we have here is truth that is in fact *not* scary or dangerous at all at first. Rather, it's fascinating – until we screw around with it just a little too much, ignoramuses that we are. At which point it may or may not be fatal, but its real 'virtue' – death-dealing – we only realize too late. Moreover, once it has 'gone off' it is, it would seem, perfectly inert forevermore. And this feels to me like a powerful way of understanding the 'loadedness' of the epistemological enterprise, of the whole Western philosophical tradition since Descartes...

CW: I think of the final scene again, and the voices calling from the darkness: "To bed with ye, ye divils, and don't be after burning your fingers with the likes of wisdom." We get truth as a gun that could go off at any moment and wisdom as a consuming fire better left untouched.

DGB: What do we make of these ways of accounting for the humanist's cherished ideals of truth and wisdom?

CW: Well, there's a sense in which you have to go back to *Hamlet*. One of the things that is so distinctive about that play is the sense you get that Shakespeare has seen so much, and seen *through* so much, that his wisdom is indeed loaded – that it's deadly. And, sure enough, we see the pile of corpses at the end, and we see the death-in-life in the characters themselves, and we know that without the right kind of handling the truth could go off in us, and it just might do us in. At that point – and this is really what *The Iceman Cometh* is all about – the logic of *paideia* is self-destruction.

DGB: I think I'm going to be sick...

CW: Now this is unsettling to humanists like myself, like you. We get a resonance here with Melville, because if you really see too much, see through too much, the danger is not just the darkness but *the inability to get out of the darkness*. Paul Tillich used to always say, "You can't talk about truth without talking about *the way to truth*; you can't talk about wisdom without talking about *the path to wisdom*."

DGB: Suddenly I am more interested in talking about *the way back*...

CW: You have to be wise in your quest for wisdom. It sounds paradoxical, but you do.

DGB: It makes me think of Descartes again. Since we sometimes forget that he doesn't simply embark on his scorched-earth campaign of radical doubt. First, he sets up his *morale provisoire*, a 'provisional morality' to which he will adhere

doggedly in that dangerous interval during which he intends to place all accepted ideas in the crucible of skepticism. And that 'placeholder' morality was, naturally, precisely conformal with quotidian ethical practices – the Jesuits at La Flèche had trained their pupil well! I had a student when I was teaching at Columbia who described the *moral provisoire* as Descartes' "ethical bungee-cord": before leaping into the abyss of doubt he harnesses himself on a long, elastic tether to the bridge of conventional, bourgeois Christian morals.

CW: It's the perfect image. Now with all these warnings about truth and wisdom, there's clearly a sense in which Melville is talking about his own text – *The Confidence-Man* – and telling us that his book is explosive, and that if it's not handled delicately, it could lead to a cynicism, a misanthropy, and so forth. There's a mature way of wrestling with this darkness, and there's an immature way of wrestling with this darkness. Where does the maturity come from? Well, it's the same issue as where we learn the wisdom to deal wisely in our quest for wisdom. There's a paradox here. There's a circularity here – a hermeneutical circle.

DGB: I want to go back to the business about the convergence of the logic of *paideia* and the logic of destruction. This puts me in mind of a certain character who means a great deal to both of us. Isn't the intersection of *paideia* and death exactly the story of Jesus Christ? Let me press for a moment on the personal side of all this: you and I, Cornel, we are believers, we are Christians.

CW: Oh, absolutely. Of a certain sort, a self-styled Christianity, absolutely.

DGB: And I keep insisting that *The Confidence-Man* is, fundamentally, a hopeful text – and I think that is a reading conditioned by my sense . . .

CW: That you know where you have placed your bets . . .

DGB: Exactly. I read this book as a parable about the necessity of faith. When someone comes into the room and says, ‘Knowledge cannot save you,’ I say, ‘Amen, I know that story . . .’

CW: You affirm it, recognize it, and say yes.

DGB: Cornel, I think that ultimately the confidence man is a messianic figure, that the apotheosis of the con-man is a messiah. Whoever can make us believe *all the way to the end* has saved us. That is what this book is about. Is that too simpleminded?

CW: Do you know that wonderful line in T. S. Eliot’s introduction to Pascal’s *Pensées*, where he says the demon of doubt ought to be part of one’s faith, ought to be always already there? Now what does that mean? Well, W. H. Auden draws this distinction between the tragedy of fate and the tragedy of possibility. The tragedy of fate is found in the Greeks – Sophocles, let’s say. And the tragedy of possibility is very much the Christian story, with Good Friday, the crucifixion, and then that Beckett-like space of Saturday, waiting for God, waiting for Godot, and then *surprised by joy*: Easter.

But then on Monday, when the resurrection has taken place, the world is still a hellish place, right? It’s not as if the resurrection has made any real difference in the ‘City of Man.’ Yes, for Christians it prefigures something to come.

Yes, for the Christian “He is risen, hal-lelujah, He is risen.” But there are still children in the gutter, eating garbage.

So for me, reading *The Confidence-Man* as a devotee of that first-century Palestinian Jew named Jesus – and my Christian sensibility is profoundly Chekhovian – for me, reading this text, I am so radically *unhoused* as a Christian. I am pushed to the wall by Melville’s Saturday-sensibility. Which is to say, the crucifixion has taken place, catastrophe has already occurred – and we’ve already noted the degree to which Melville is an artist of catastrophe. Hope? I don’t think that for him, whatever threadbare possibility there is – I don’t think there’s anything like what we need to get to *Sunday*, to get to *Easter*.

Now yes, Melville is wrestling with the angel of meaning, he’s wrestling with the angel of death the way Jacob did – but he can’t get a new name, you know? He’s a *god-wrestler* like Israel, but he remains a god-wrestler *all the way down*. Am I attracted to him? Yes. But I don’t see the object of faith there for him. I don’t see the end and the aim – the *telos* of faith. Or at least it isn’t ever going to be what we Christians would want. His skepticism is too deep; for him, that demon of doubt that Eliot talks about *stands at the center*. And this is what that Hawthorne letter was about, the one I quoted before: “He can neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief.” Wittgenstein faced the same predicament, right?

DGB: Let’s go back to Auden. You know the great line from his *Christmas Oratorio*:

*Joseph, you have heard
What Mary says occurred;
Yes, it may be so.
Is it likely? No.*

CW: Right! [Laughs]

DGB: [Laughs] Well there is the beauty of it! Remember when Melville writes that the true ‘original character’ is like a “revolving Drummond light” – basically a stage spotlight?

CW: The *As You Like It* formulation of the world in general ...

DGB: Yes, perhaps – though the reference is here mediated by technology in a strange way. But anyway, my point is this: you know the way that every Catholic church organizes the sacred space of the altar in the center of a threefold figuration of the Holy Family: the crucifix behind, Mary usually stage right, Joseph stage left?

CW: Yes.

DGB: I feel as if the Drummond light of the confidence man bathes this triptych in its own distinctive glow. There could hardly be a more fantastic confidence game than the fundamental, foundational Christian mythology: a story about parturition without sexual contact, a story of God made man, a story of death that gives life. What we’ve got here is a project to look the most basic truths about human existence – logical, empirical – right in the face, and then to deny them flat. And it was carried off with such aplomb, with such sublime confidence, that it succeeded in changing the shape of the world and bringing radical novelty to the experience of the human across seven continents and two thousand years.

CW: I hear you.

DGB: Here’s the thing: it doesn’t scare me to have that Drummond light set up

square on the very altar – to have it illuminate that threefold figuration of our faith for a moment, and to have Melville remind me that this is a kind of conjuration, possibly the most spectacular conjuration known to humanity. I’m not worried. After all, there we are enacting that faith in yet another conjuration: ‘This is my body ...’ It is? A fitting sacrament for the altar of such a faith. Perfect! And anyway, where are you going to stand and tell me that it’s all ‘wrong’?

CW: But it’s not that simple. Once you let loose a lie in the world, it can easily take on a life and logic of its own. So that it may initially have been sustaining or whatnot, but the canker works gradually. The danger is that lies can become habit-forming. [Laughs] That’s part of what Melville is saying here too, you see?

DGB: Well now, after all, the truth has been so much our friend – the truth has done us so many favors. If I sound a little acidic here, I am borrowing Melville’s acid. The truth? Oh, you want to play with the truth, well hang on, I’ve got it for you right here – Oh my! It’s a loaded gun and you don’t know what to do with it ...

CW: If not delicately handled, you’re right. I mean there’s a certain practical wisdom that goes together with truth telling, but the same is true for lie telling. Think of Plato’s “Noble Lie” ...

DGB: Truth? Lies? The necessity of faith is what we are left with in this world. We have extinguished the epistemological questions – out they went with the solar lamp of the final scene. All that business of proof and evidence doesn’t apply here. The tools of propositional calculus or the techniques for

making a taxonomy of the cryptograms – all that stuff is irrelevant now. We are now talking about final things...

CW: But on the other hand, Melville is here to remind us that our attempt to extinguish metaphysical questions in a move toward the existential may *itself* be another illusion, another masquerade, another mode of evasion, another kind of distraction. Because maybe – maybe the truth is death. You hear what I'm saying? Eternal death, eternal darkness, absolute tragedy. You see what I mean?

DGB: You say the truth may be death, but I'm holding the gun very, very carefully...

CW: Exactly. I hold it carefully with you, brother, absolutely. But intellectual integrity requires pushing as far as you can; you have to try to sort things out; you have to try to achieve some coherence, some consistency.

DGB: Really?

CW: Oh yes, I think so.

DGB: Well you go ahead. I don't buy it. This is the game the folks play over in the philosophy department. They have made intellectual integrity into a little ring, a little agonistic space where there is basically one rule: the law of noncontradiction. You can't have A and not-A. And if they can maneuver you into that arena, they'll kick your tail.

CW: But that agon is *indispensable*...

DGB: Really? It has nothing to do with human life. To be human is A *and* not-A – that is our fundamental condition.

CW: OK, but what about cell phones and bridges? I mean science and technology you have to acknowledge, right?

Metaphysics, money & the Messiah

DGB: The desire to transcend the human condition can take several forms: we can aspire to be angels, or we can aspire to be machines. I prefer the former.

CW: Well, see, for somebody like myself, a Chekhovian Christian, I don't want to transcend the human at all. I want to revel in the human, acknowledge the call for help, connect back to the human sources that sustain me in space and time and human history. I don't think the transcendence of the human is a positive move in any direction.

DGB: So interesting. But what about Christian transcendence? What about *Sunday*?

CW: We *wait* for Sunday. See, you've got two levels here. Oh, this is very good stuff – this is powerful stuff! There are two levels here: one is the Dostoyevskian level, which is the inability to *live* Christianity – the simple impracticability of real Christian life. I'm thinking of the Sermon on the Mount, yes, but also of the Sermon on the Plain, the sixth chapter of Luke. I'm thinking of the wrestling in *The Brothers Karamazov*. So we Christians, who have the audacity to say that the seemingly weakest force on earth – love – will ultimately transform a world of hatred and bigotry and cruelty and xenophobia and domination and oppression, we also seem to make the best haters!

And then, on top of that, here comes Melville, saying, 'But anyway, what difference does the practical part make? Since y'all are just enacting a *masquerade*

anyway, with various kinds of masks that hide the incongruity and the dubi-tability of this set of *illusions* that you call the Christian story.' See, here is where Melville pushes a Christian like me up against the wall. Dostoyevsky already worked the gut pretty hard, and here comes Melville swinging for my head!

DGB: Oh, but Cornel I don't buy it. You're way too smooth! These guys haven't got you against the wall...

CW: [Laughing] I'm swinging back, I'm like Ali on the ropes. I'm saying to myself, you know, "Foreman's not going to do me in..."

DGB: [Laughing] There's no way!

CW: That's right, I'm coming off the ropes!

DGB: To be sure! Because if there was ever a character who had the moves, who had the silver tongue...

CW: Who's moving all the time...

DGB: Who can come back for Jesus – *it would be you!*

CW: Ha!

DGB: Let me just say it again: If, in the end, as this book suggests, it's smoke and mirrors *all the way down*, then I would want the smoke and the mirrors in your hands, brother.

CW: But you have to understand, that grotesque Negro cripple with whom we started – he is part of my own heritage. Because what you actually have there is a jazz-like figure, an improvisational figure on the ropes, a figure who's able to

use smoke and mirrors not just to survive catastrophe but to try to maintain a certain kind of sanity and dignity, a certain kind of compassion, and a certain kind of hope. And Melville sees that in his grotesque Negro cripple – who signifies all those Black folks in America, on the *underside* in America, always on the ropes, preserving a hope against hope, but doing it in such a way that they're not trying to trump somebody else's options and alternatives. That's why Black Guinea inspires me to try to be a blues man in the life of the mind, to play jazz in the world of ideas. And Melville? He's my agnostic comrade and democratic companion!

DGB: Cornel, I'll tell you what, do you remember what I said about a lesson of *The Confidence-Man* being that you should never have a philosophical champion or a prophetic hero to whom you have not owed money? Well here is the thing: Cornel, I am in need – I am in desperate need of *a hundred dollars*...

CW: [Laughing, taking a roll of bills from his vest-pocket] Oh, that is marvelous! Lord! Oh, this is a good *time*, man!

DGB: [Laughing] Oh! My! Look at all that green! Oh! That *is* the money shot! Oh, that is too good! OK, we'll stop, we've got to stop, stop the tape...

[Both continue laughing...]

Omer Bartov

*on Eastern Galicia's
past & present*

Not many people in the United States, or for that matter, Europe, have heard of Buczacz (or Buchach), even though it was the hometown of Yosef Shmuel Agnon (1888 – 1970), the Nobel Prize laureate who recreated it in his novels and stories as a microcosm of East European shtetl life; of Emanuel Ringelblum (1900 – 1944), the great historian of Polish-Jewish relations and the founder of the *Oneg Shabbat* archive, which preserves the records of the Warsaw Ghetto, next to which he was eventually denounced and murdered; and of Simon Wiesenthal (1908 – 2005), who came to be

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known after the war as the Vienna-based 'Nazi hunter.' One of Sigmund Freud's grandparents lived in Buczacz, as did many famous rabbis, nowadays largely forgotten by the non-Orthodox. Several lesser-known Ukrainian writers and musicians, including the impressive opera singer Solomiya Krushelnytska (1872 – 1952), were born and raised either in Buczacz or in nearby villages. My own mother spent her childhood there in the 1920s and 1930s.

Buczacz is located in what used to be called Eastern Galicia, the eastern part of the southern Polish territory annexed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1772 and made into the crownland of Galicia. Following World War I, Eastern Galicia was reattached to the new Polish state. It was taken over by the Soviet Union as part of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact in 1939, occupied by Nazi Germany after its attack on Russia in 1941, and then taken over again by the Soviet Union and annexed to the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine. Since 1991, the former Eastern Galicia – whose largest city is L'viv (Lvov, Lwów, Lemberg) – has constituted part of the western region of the independent Ukraine.

Buczacz, like many other towns in Eastern Galicia, was a multiethnic society. While the rural population was mainly Ukrainian (or Ruthenian, as it was previously called), the town dwellers were predominantly Polish and Jewish. The Jewish inhabitants of many of the small towns in this region, as well as in other parts of Eastern Europe and Western Russia, called these places *shtetlach* (plural of *shtetl*), indicating that the majority, or at least the plurality, of a town's population were Jews. But ethnic groups – arranged first and foremost by religion, and then from the latter part of the nineteenth century as different nations, or 'races,' as well – had lived side

by side in Eastern Galicia for some four hundred years.

While there were periods of strife – both domestic and with external forces – and although we should not idealize their relations, these groups knew only the reality of coexistence. Professions, neighborhoods, houses of worship, marriages, and burials were all organized according to ethnic and religious lines, yet people of different groups interacted constantly – in marketplaces and workplaces, in schools and public spaces, and increasingly in military and state service.

This reality began to change in the late nineteenth century, as people grew to associate religion and ethnicity, and to link ethnicity to nationality. This produced the demand to exclude, or at least limit, the rights of ‘foreign’ groups in the territories. In other words, nationalism – to which tradition and religion were grafted, and for which they acted as a sanction – began to wreak havoc on these borderlands. Nationalism was, of course, one of the main underlying causes of World War I, and it exploded with pent-up fury once the old multinational empires that had ruled Europe’s eastern borderland regions fell apart under the impact of the war.

In Eastern Galicia (at this time part of a resurrected Polish state that had ceased to exist for a time in the late eighteenth century, when it was swallowed up by Austria, Russia, and Prussia), the seething tensions between national minorities became dangerous both for the inhabitants of the region and for Poland as a whole. Devastated in World War I, Eastern Galicia was renamed Little Eastern Poland by its new rulers. It never completely recovered from the demographic and economic repercussions of the brutal Russian occupation, and the flight or deportation of hundreds of thousands of its inhabitants, many of them Jews.

The Polish government tried to colonize this land with ethnic Poles in order to diminish the demographic preponderance of the Ukrainian population. But Ukrainian nationalism, which had evolved there under the more permissible Habsburg rule before the war, took a violent turn, sprouting terrorism with strong anti-Semitic and anti-Polish components. Independent Poland, especially after the death of its dictator Józef Piłsudski, was also becoming increasingly anti-Semitic. The right-wing integral nationalists began to speak of a solution to the ‘Jewish question,’ one that would entail the departure or removal of the Jewish minority. The Jews, who constituted about 10 percent of Poland’s population, were especially numerous and often wretchedly poor in the eastern territories.

The Soviet occupation of Eastern Galicia (along with Volhynia and Western Belorussia to its north) between September 1939 and July 1941 greatly exacerbated the local tensions and dramatically destabilized the already fragile economic, social, and political conditions there. The Soviets tried rapidly to impose their own political and economic principles. They ruthlessly deported Polish nationalists, political activists, professionals, and intellectuals; and they went after Zionists, other Jewish political and religious leaders, businessmen, and white-collar workers. In the process, they also destroyed traditional Jewish communities. During the latter part of the Soviet occupation, which had initially presented itself as promoting the cause of Ukrainian nationalism by facilitating unification with Soviet Ukraine, the authorities turned against anticommunist Ukrainian nationalists with a vengeance. When the Germans invaded these territories, they found a legacy of violence, rage, and fear they could exploit to their

advantage, at least as far as their own plans of genocide and colonization were concerned.

Most important, even though the Soviets had deported Jews in disproportionately higher numbers than either Poles or Ukrainians, the local gentile population had come to identify the Jews with the Communists, and thus with their recent suffering by Soviet hands. In part, the fact that Jews were indeed proportionally overrepresented among the Communists encouraged this view; and in part, it also reflected the reality that Soviet rule had provided opportunities for Jews – young Jews especially – that the anti-Semitic Polish state had blocked. The consequences of this perception were of course disastrous when the Nazis made the Jewish population the main target of persecution and murder.

In the brief three years of German occupation, 1941 – 1944, the Jewish population of Eastern Galicia was almost entirely wiped out. Of the more than five hundred thousand Jewish inhabitants, about half were deported to extermination camps and the other half murdered in or near their own towns, often in sight and with the willing collaboration of their gentile neighbors. Initially, the Ukrainian militias and nationalists worked closely with the Germans, hoping the new rulers would assist them in creating an independent anticommunist Ukrainian state. Once they realized that this would not happen, and that the Germans were likely to lose the struggle against the Soviet Union, Ukrainian nationalists turned against German rule. Yet, simultaneously, they fought the arriving Soviet forces and carried out widespread ethnic-cleansing operations against the Polish population in hopes of ending the war in an ethnically homogeneous Ukraine.

In this the Ukrainian nationalists succeeded: Ukraine became largely ethnically homogeneous in its western parts (in the east there were and still are large Russian concentrations). But it did not become independent until 1991. The nationalist insurgency against the renewed Soviet occupation continued until the 1950s, with large-scale warfare between Ukrainian insurgents and Soviet security forces. Afterward, the region remained a high-security area and difficult to visit; its economy was depressed and little changed there until a few years ago.

My original impulse in undertaking research on Buczacz, in the heart of this region, was to try to understand how one interethnic community – whose constituent groups had for centuries managed a delicate, complex co-existence – was transformed into a community of genocide. In researching its history, I discovered the extraordinary richness and variety of the historical sources and the individual voices of this community, whose population ranged in the twentieth century from just ten thousand to fifteen thousand people. Searching for documents entailed using archives in Ukraine, Poland, Russia, Austria, Germany, Israel, the United States, and even France and Britain. The number of languages I had to master in order to put together the story of this place was also staggering. Moreover, I discovered that many of Buczacz's citizens had recorded their testimonies, mostly of suffering, exile, and murder. I collected hundreds of these Jewish, Polish, and Ukrainian written and oral accounts to recreate the complex fabric of a site whose biography can only be told through many voices.

Indeed, the schizophrenic nature of the town's biography is what makes it all the more intriguing. Buczacz, and many of its sister towns across the wide

swath of Europe's eastern borderlands, offers several narratives of its past. Though they speak of the same place, each of these narratives is radically different, depending on the narrator's ethnic-religious identity. For the Jews, a town like Buczacz was a venerable old *shtetl*. For the Ukrainians, it was part of their ancestral lands, ruled and exploited by the Poles and their Jewish agents. For the Poles, it was a borderland they had civilized and protected from savage invaders from the east and the south, an outpost of European culture and Roman Catholic faith.

While undertaking this research, I became fascinated as well with the current Ukrainian politics of memory, and how they relate to a past largely unknown to the present population. My ruminations on this issue culminated in a book, which Princeton University Press is publishing this fall, *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine*, a journey in time and space into this cradle of Jewish mysticism, Ukrainian nationalism, and Polish Romanticism. Since its independence, Ukraine has been obliterating the last remnants of Jewish civilization from this region and replacing them with the symbols of a resurgent local nationalism. The book documents cemeteries turned into markets, synagogues made into garbage dumps and sports halls, unmarked sites of mass killings, and staircases made out of gravestones. Conversely, it also reveals the rapid erection of statues, memorials, and museums that not only celebrate the Ukrainian nation but also glorify nationalist leaders who collaborated with the Nazis in the murder of the Jews. The book includes sixty out of hundreds of photographs I took in order to record this second destruction as well as the rapidly vanishing remnants of a world that is no more.

Harriet Ritvo

on the animal turn

Learned attention to animals is far from new. The scientific study of animals stretches back at least to Aristotle. Livestock have attracted the interest of scholars with either a practical or theoretical interest in agriculture. Critics of art and literature have explicated animal symbols and animal themes. Historians

Harriet Ritvo, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2005, is Arthur J. Conner Professor of History at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is the author of "The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age" (1987) and "The Platypus and the Mermaid, and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination" (1997); the coeditor of "Macropolitics of Nineteenth-Century Literature: Nationalism, Imperialism, Exoticism" (1991); and the editor of Charles Darwin's "The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication" (1998). She has a forthcoming book, "The Dawn of Green: Manchester, Thirlmere, and the Victorian Environment," to be published by the University of Chicago Press.

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have chronicled important animal-related institutions, from humane societies to zoos. People distinguished in their association with animals, whether as breeders or hunters or scientists, have had their biographers – as have some animals distinguished in their own right, from Jumbo to Seabiscuit.

Nevertheless, during the last several decades, animals have emerged as a more frequent focus of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, as quantified in published books and articles, conference presentations, new societies, and new journals. With this change in degree has come a potential change in kind. As it has expanded the range of possible research topics in a number of disciplines, the animal turn has also suggested new relationships between scholars and their subjects, and new understandings of the role of animals in the past and at present.

Most scholars who specialize in the study of animals believe that human beings fall within that category. This is as true of scientists, who locate *Homo sapiens* within the primate order (along with lemurs, monkeys, and other apes), as it is of humanists (whether they are posthumanist or not), who claim kindred in footnotes or parentheses. (Here is my own declaration: I share the view that people are animals.)

But, often, such assertions seem defensive, even strident. Indeed, the recurrent need to make them reveals persistent semantic and cultural tension, as does the reluctance of many taxonomists to relinquish the distinction between the family *Pongidae*, including bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans, and the more exclusive family *Hominidae*, reserved for australopithecines and humans.

The entry for ‘animal’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* similarly distills the

uncomfortable conjunction of similarity and otherness. The first sense, illustrated with learned examples ranging from John de Trevisa to Thomas Henry Huxley, includes all living things that are not plants. The second sense, illustrated mostly with literary quotations, is less inclusive and more popular: “In common usage: one of the lower animals; a brute, or beast, as distinguished from man.”

No matter how careful their definitions or how forceful their assertions, scholars are inevitably influenced by the common usage of the terms they deploy, as well as by their more rarefied and specialized senses. With regard to the study of animals, this often means that explicit claims of unity (humans are animals) paradoxically work to reinforce the human-animal boundary they are intended to dissolve. That is to say, such claims incorporate a grudging acknowledgment that this boundary is widely recognized and powerfully influential. Why else would it be continually necessary to deny its validity or remind ourselves of its arbitrariness? Further, like clichéd metaphors that turn out to be only half-dead, such claims may bring buried assumptions into the full light of consciousness, thus inspiring articulate contradiction. Some scholars within the emergent field of animal studies call themselves ‘posthumanists,’ but there is a sense in which that label embodies the same kind of wishful thinking that the term ‘late capitalism’ does.

The story does not end with this paradox, however. Cognitive dissonance seems to be among the least troublesome of human mental conditions. Assertions of extreme difference – for example, that animals lack souls, intelligence, or even feeling – have traditionally coexisted with implicit acknowledgments of similarity, even identity. People

who would resist the notion of shared phylogeny have often embraced metaphorical kinship. Thus the apparatus of animal pedigree emerged in Britain – not coincidentally – at about the same time as published records of elite human ancestral lines, distilled in volumes often referred to as ‘stud books.’ With regard to human participation, the animal-oriented books were less restrictive. Breeders and fanciers of relatively undistinguished personal extraction could bask in the genealogical glow of their chattels. Contemporary examples of parallel slip-page abound, as the movie *Best in Show*, a satiric look at high-end canine competition, demonstrated several years ago, and as the marathon telecasts of the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show display annually.

Understandings of animal behavior have been similarly inconsistent. In the nineteenth century, for example, as now, some pets really did belong to human families in all but the narrowest biological sense. At the other end of the affective scale, the relationships between some working animals and their owners strongly resembled the relationships between some human laborers and their employers. The docility and loyal devotion of dogs and horses were praised in terms equally applicable to human servants. Such behavior could also be appreciatively characterized as ‘sagacity’ or even ‘intelligence.’

The intellectual powers of the animals anatomically closest to humans inspired more complex responses, but the conventions for displaying apes and monkeys unambiguously emphasized resemblance. Zoo apes and sideshow monkeys were dressed in jackets and dresses; ate from utensils and drank from cups; and appeared to enjoy cigarettes and illustrated books. The guardians of public morality kept a watchful eye on animal

attractions, worried that they were potential sites of unedifying behavior on the part of both the exhibited creatures (so that the feeding of live prey to carnivores was prohibited) and the raucous human observers (so that the admission of the lower classes into zoos was initially controversial). The pages of many natural history books and travel accounts contained still more suggestive evidence of closeness: reports, speculative but compelling, of the sexual interest of wild apes in human females. Sometimes such resonances were figured as metonymy, emphasizing similarity, and sometimes they were figured as metaphor, emphasizing difference. But whether the animal analogue was wild or domesticated, primate or ungulate or carnivore, continuity and discontinuity were inextricably intertwined.

As always, some animals were more equal than others. The likeliest targets of unconscious identification and projection were the animals who were most like people, either because they looked like people or because they were members (whether underprivileged or hyperprivileged) of the same society. Animals outside these overlapping circles of familiarity were much less likely potential surrogates. They might serve as the subjects of scientific study and amateur fascination, but with a few exceptions – the social insects (ants and bees) whose economic organizations seemed to replicate those of people, or the aquatic creatures that, in the spirit of “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” could be seen to figure in prenatal human development as well as in remote human ancestry – the interest was of a different kind.

Indeed, it was so different that it brings the use of the blanket term ‘animal’ to cover them all into question. This expansive and promiscuous usage epitomizes a serious difficulty that arises

when we abrogate the conventional dichotomy between humans and other animals: the elimination of one boundary seems to require the establishment of another or others, although the location of replacement boundaries is equally problematic. If no obvious gap can be discerned between most kinds of animals and those apparently closest to them, large gaps emerge when very dissimilar animals are juxtaposed. The claim that people are like cats or beavers or hippopotami (that they belong in the same category with those kinds of creatures) is not the same as the claim that they are like jellyfish or fleas or worms. Both claims are interesting, and both seem true to me, but they make sense in different contexts.

Confusion about the appropriate context – or intentional misunderstanding of which sense of ‘animal’ is being invoked – can lead to the kind of *reductio ad absurdum* that often undermines animal advocacy, at least when animal advocates are not preaching to the choir. It is relatively easy to explain why pigs and dogs should receive the same legal and moral consideration, even if it is much less easy to ensure that they actually receive it. Resistance to acknowledging suine claims to humane treatment tends to rest on pragmatic (mostly economic) grounds.

But when, under the general ‘animal’ rubric, claims to consideration are made on behalf of creatures that share fewer human capacities, resistance becomes stronger and more principled. If defended in the same terms as those of our fellow mammals (or even our fellow vertebrates), the rights of lobsters, oysters, or termites offer ready targets for ridicule. (Of course, this is a historically specific observation. Two centuries ago Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* was travestied on the grounds

that if rights were granted to women, farmyard animals would be next in line.)

The most sweepingly inclusive (or powerfully reductive) categories thus make more sense for scientists than they do for scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Biology has offered increasingly detailed and fascinating accounts of the genetic similarities that connect the smallest, simplest animals with the largest and most complex – and, indeed, that unify all the eukaryotes, whether animal, plant, or fungus. But such insights have had little impact on everyday understanding and behavior at present, and their retroactive influence is still more limited.

The study of human culture, whether contemporary or historical, requires a focus that is at once larger and smaller. For understanding the relationships between people and other animals, the fact of similarity is important, but so also is the extent of similarity, which tends to be a matter of opinion or perception. It varies from place to place and from time to time. For example, although the general outline of mammalian taxonomy has remained reasonably constant for several centuries, Anglophones tend to feel closer to gorillas and chimpanzees now than they did in the late nineteenth century. Meanwhile, the once-common notion that dogs, or even horses, might bear a closer resemblance to people in important ways has largely disappeared.

Thus, as the animal turn breaks new ground, it also revisits perpetually unanswered questions. Nor are such questions confined to the realm of scholarship. The standing of animals, even those closest to us, still presents vexed moral, legal, and political issues, and the range of possible positions is not very different from the range that was available to Victorians. Within my own expe-

*Note by
Harriet
Ritvo*

rience as a scholar, the study of animals has become more respectable and more popular in many disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, but it is far from the recognized core of any of them. It remains marginal in most disciplines, and (not the same thing) it is often on the borderline between disciplines. This awkward location or set of locations is, however, the source of much of its appeal and power. Its very marginality allows the study of animals to challenge settled assumptions and relationships – to re-raise the largest issues – both within the community of scholars and in the larger society to which they and their subjects belong.

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Inside back cover: A path on the Fedor (or Fedir) Hill, overlooking the town of Buczacz (Buchach), in Eastern Galicia, Ukraine. Along this path, winding its way up from the town to the hill, several thousand Jewish inhabitants of the town were led by the Germans and their Ukrainian collaborators to mass execution sites and shot in front of pre-dug mass graves, mostly in the years 1942 – 1943. During the years of German occupation, the Jewish population of Eastern Galicia was almost entirely wiped out. See Omer Bartov on *Eastern Galicia's past & present*, pages 115 – 118: “Buczacz, and many of its sister towns across the wide swath of Europe’s eastern borderlands, offers several narratives of its past. Though they speak of the same place, each of these narratives is radically different, depending on the narrator’s ethnic-religious identity.” Photo Credit: Omer Bartov.



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