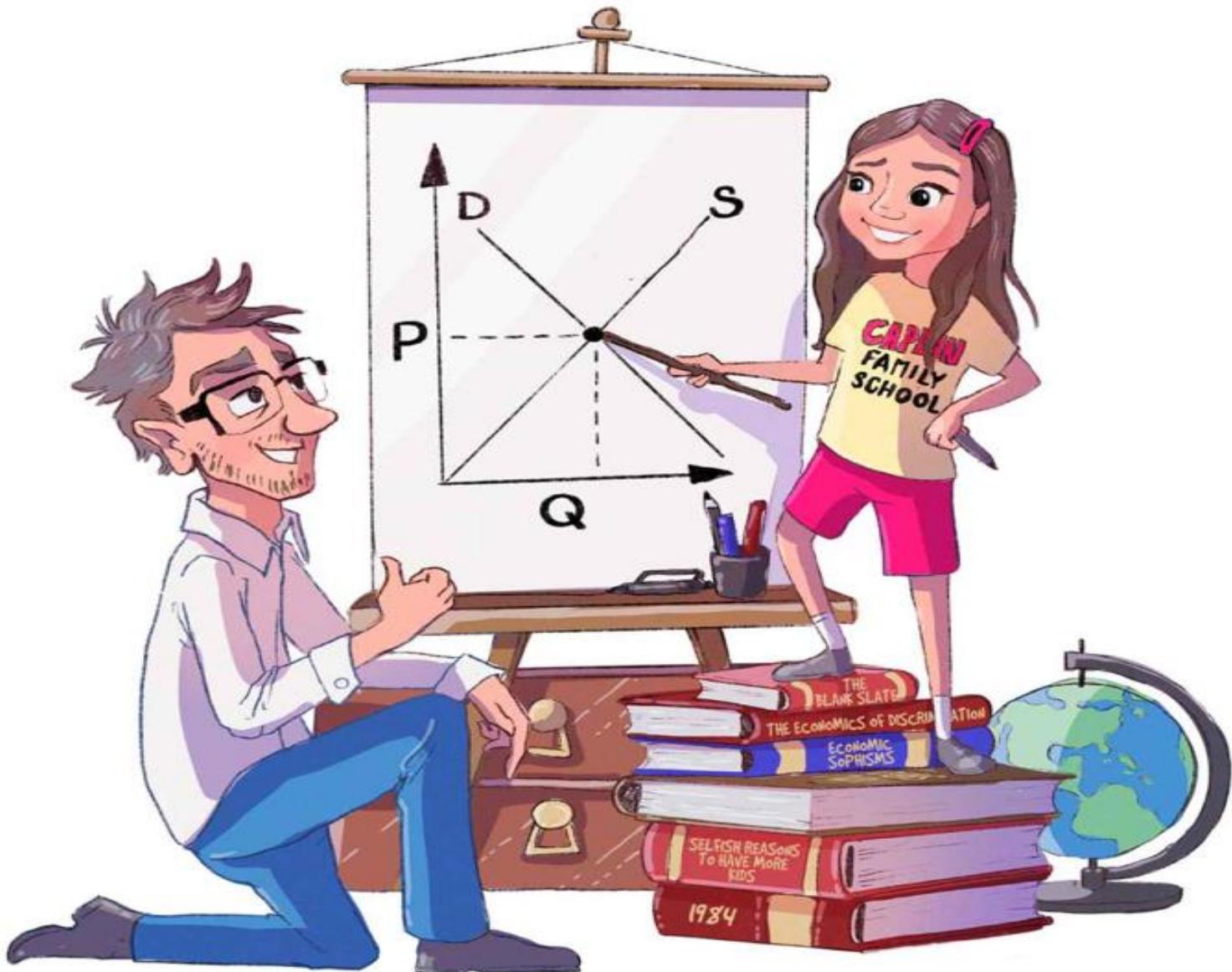


DON'T BE A FEMINIST



Essays on
Genuine Justice

Bryan Caplan

Don't Be a Feminist

Essays on Genuine Justice

First published by Bet On It Books, Fairfax, Virginia 2022

Copyright © 2022 by Bryan Caplan

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

First edition

Editing by Ashruta Acharya

To my wife, Corina, and my daughter, Valeria.

Contents

I. THE SOCIAL INJUSTICE MOVEMENT

Don't Be a Feminist: A Letter to My Daughter

The Uniformity and Exclusion Movement

Anti-Communism and Anti-Racism

Against Argumentative Definitions

Repealing Political Discrimination

Implicit and Structural Witchery

Orwellian Othering

Loyalty Oaths Compared: An Orwellian Exercise

Good Manners vs. Political Correctness

Right-Wing Grievance Studies

Don't Pickpocket Your Students

The Wrong Pieces on the Chessboard

Does Identity Politics Pay?

Including the Renegade

Touchy-Feely Bull in a China Shop

Colonialism and Anti-Colonialism: Blame Nationalism for Both

II. BEING BECKERIAN

[The Missing Right-Wing Firms: A Beckerian Puzzle](#)

[Tabarrok Should Bask in His Victimhood](#)

[What Is IQ — and Why Does It Matter?](#)

[Does It Matter If IQ Matters?](#)

[End All Crime the Easy Way](#)

[What Would Efficient Sexual Harassment Law Look Like?](#)

[The Discouraged Suitor](#)

[Endogenous Sexism](#)

[Endogenous Sexism Explained](#)

[Losing Ground, The Bell Curve, and Coming Apart: A Reconciliation](#)

[The Barber \(Not\) Next Door](#)

[Immigration Restrictions as Affirmative Action](#)

III. EVERYDAY EVIL

[The Economics and Philosophy of the Cruise Ship](#)

[Immigration, Trespassing, and Socialism](#)

[One Day at ICE: A Dialogue on the Philosophy of Immigration](#)

[The Prohibition of Evacuation](#)

[The Berlin Wall: In or Out?](#)

[The Berlin Cage: A Dialogue](#)

[The Economics and Philosophy of the Wall](#)

[Ten Points on the Wrong Side of History](#)

[Columbus: The Far Left is Dead Right](#)

[Some Men Just Want to Watch Mexico Burn](#)

[Where Eugenics Goes Wrong: The Implications of Comparative Advantage](#)

[Chabon's Unkindest Cut](#)

[Collective Guilt: A Socratic Dialogue](#)

[IV. CLEAN HANDS](#)

[My Hands Are Clean](#)

[Libertarianism as Moral Overlearning](#)

[Terrible Turnaround](#)

[Murder: A Socratic Dialogue](#)

[Patria, Parenti, Amici](#)

[SDB and Me: An Autobiographical Exploration](#)

[IQ With Conscience](#)

[Against High-IQ Misanthropy](#)

[How Bad is White Nationalism?](#)

[The Libertarian Target](#)

[The Prevalence of Marxism in Academia](#)

[Redeeming Tenure](#)

[I Dream of Repentance](#)

[The Apologies of Repeal](#)

Who Really Cares About the Poor?: A Socratic Dialogue

When May We Be Happy?

I

The Social Injustice Movement

Don't Be a Feminist: A Letter to My Daughter

Dear Vali,

You're growing up, and before long you're going to hear about an idea called "feminism." Most of those who talk about this idea will speak as if feminism is obviously true. They will speak as if feminism is entitled to your support. And they will speak as if you have to be evil to oppose feminism. As I write this, you're still too young to read it. But I want to get my thoughts down on paper now so they're waiting for you when you're ready.

As you've probably heard, Vali, I am one of feminism's opponents. And since I am your father, you know I'm not evil. Indeed, in at least one way, I'm saintly: I never lie to you. Other adults often try to deceive you, allegedly "for your own good." Your father, however, believes in telling you the truth – even when the truth is ugly or unpopular. You know all this from first-hand experience. However you react to my critique of feminism, what follows is the literal truth according to me.

1. Defining Feminism

To start, what is “feminism”? Many casually define it as “the view that men and women should be treated equally” or even “the radical notion that women are people.”¹ However, virtually all non-feminists in the United States believe exactly the same thing. In this careful 2016 survey, for example, only 33% of men said they were feminists, yet 94% of men agreed that “men and women should be social, political, and economic equals.”²

So what? Well, the whole point of a definition is to *distinguish* one concept from all the others. Any sensible definition of feminism must therefore specify what feminists believe that non-feminists *disbelieve*. Defining feminism as “the view that men and women should be treated equally” makes about as much sense as defining feminism as “the view that the sky is blue.” Sure, feminists believe in the blueness of the sky – but who doesn’t?

What then is a reasonable definition – a definition that identifies the central point of contention between feminists and non-feminists? Something like this: *Feminism is the view that society generally treats men more fairly than women.*³

What makes my definition so superior to the competition’s? Just talk to self-identified feminists and non-feminists, and you’ll see that my definition fits the common usage of the word. Ask any feminist if “society generally treats men more fairly than women” and they’ll confidently agree. If you push further and ask, “Doesn’t society sometimes treat men unfairly, too?” they’ll respond along the lines of, “Sure, but the point is that women endure far *more* unfairness than men.” In contrast, if you ask non-feminists if “society generally treats men more fairly than women,” they *won’t* rush to sign on the dotted line. Instead, they’ll say “Maybe in some ways,” express agnosticism, flatly disagree – or just shrug.

Upshot: You should be a feminist if and only if society generally treats men more fairly than women. So does it? This is a complex, confusing question, but we can credibly answer it. How? The best way to tackle complex, confusing questions, as I've taught you, is to break them into simpler, clearer steps. Here are the steps I propose.

Step 1: List the main ways that society *appears* to treat women less fairly than men – and the main ways that society *appears* to treat men less fairly than women.

Step 2: Weigh the extent to which these fairness gaps are genuine, by correcting for gender gaps in actual performance.

Step 3: Aggregate all the performance-corrected gaps from Step 2.

So let's follow the steps.

2. Listing Unfairness

Listing the main ways that society appears to treat women less fairly than men is easy because feminists have been broadcasting their concerns for generations. Topping the list:

- a. Men make more money than women.
- b. Men are overrepresented at the top levels of business, government, science, and beyond.
- c. Men do much less childcare and housework than women.
- d. Non-custodial fathers provide little financial or parental support for their children.
- e. Men are the perpetrators, and women are the victims, of the vast majority of sexual violence.
- f. Men view women as “sex objects.”

Listing the main ways that society appears to treat men less fairly than women requires only a little more reflection to complete.⁴ Topping the list:

- a. Men are overrepresented at the *bottom* levels of society. They do most of the nasty, dangerous work, are much more likely to be homeless or imprisoned, and much more likely to kill themselves.
- b. Men spend much more time on the job than women.
- c. The law heavily favors women in child custody and child support disputes.
- d. Men are more likely to be victims of violent crime.
- e. Men are much more likely to die in combat; in fact, during serious military conflicts, they face military slavery (“the draft”).
- f. Women view men as “success objects.”

Critics of feminism typically respond to the first list with the second list. Since the key contention is whether, “Society generally treats men more fairly than women,” and the two lists are in the same ballpark of unfairness, this is not a bad approach. However, merely countering the first list with the second takes a questionable shortcut.⁵

3. Evaluating Unfairness

The questionable shortcut is: *Assuming that if outcomes are unequal, society is unfair.* Quite crowd-pleasing. Yet on reflection, there is a world of difference between unfairness and inequality. I have never won an Olympic medal, but I was not treated less *fairly* than repeat Olympic champions. I have zero medals due to my own lack of athletic talent and effort, not

because the tournament's rules are somehow stacked against me. The upshot: To assess feminism, we cannot merely list gender inequalities; we have to figure out *why* these inequalities exist.

If this sounds hard, it is. Fortunately, I belong to an intellectual discipline that knows how to handle questions like these. My discipline, as you recall, is economics. Our standard approach to gender disparities is to use statistics to compare the results for men and women with *identical* non-gender traits.⁶ This allows us to see, for example, if women make less money because they are women, or because they are less likely to work full-time jobs. When we apply this method to the modern United States, most of the apparent unfairness for *both* women and men turns out to be grossly overblown.

a. *The Earnings Gap*

Let's start with the gender earnings gap. Economists have studied it for decades, and I've spent years going over the data myself.⁷ There's a strong result: If you compare single, childless men to single, childless women, almost all of the earnings gap goes away.⁸ The overwhelming reason women earn less is that the average man focuses heavily on making money, while the average woman tries to *balance* making money, caring for her kids, and self-expression.

Honestly, though, the statistics are overkill. If it were really true that women were paid, say, 20% less than equally productive men, every business would have a no-brainer get-rich-quick strategy: Fire all your men and replace them with women, cutting labor costs by up to 20%. If this strategy really worked, it would have swept the economy ages ago. Why

complain about “unfairness” when you can become a billionaire by counteracting it?

Admittedly, there are a few clever economists who acknowledge all these facts, yet still decry women’s unfair pay. How? One popular story blames society for failing to have massive social programs to give mothers easier choices. This is a bizarrely high bar: Total strangers are “unfair” because they don’t want to pay even more taxes to help you raise your own kids. What, are taxpayers your slaves?

Another reaction to the econometric evidence is to blame society for “brainwashing” women into focusing on childcare at the expense of career success. For as long as I can remember, however, the shoe has been on the other foot. Schools and the media aggressively encourage girls to pursue career success and avoid early pregnancy. They almost never preach the joys of motherhood. Upshot: If women prioritize family over work, they do so *despite* “brainwashing” rather than because of it.

In any case, this “brainwashing” story is doubly absurd. First, balancing career success against quality of life is common sense, not an exotic dogma you have to ram down people’s throats. Second, if a child blames his behavior on cartoons, we roll our eyes. We should be even more dismissive of those who try to shift the responsibility for people’s career and family choices onto “society.”

b. The Top and the Bottom

Moving on, what about men’s over-representation at the top *and* the bottom of society? Many feminists are barely aware that low-status males are alive. Thoughtful feminists, however, blame male failure on male behavior. Far more males are imprisoned because... far more males commit

crimes. Far more males are homeless because... males are far more likely to live lives of idleness and substance abuse. Men do most of the nasty, dangerous work because... they value money over job satisfaction. Men do the most physically demanding jobs because... they are *better* at that kind of work. And when thoughtful feminists say such things, they are almost surely right.

Once you blame male failure on male behavior, however, you should consider the possibility that male behavior also explains male *success*. And again, it almost surely does. Men are more likely to pursue careers in science, tech, and politics, and more likely to start their own businesses. This alone accounts for much of the success gap. Similarly, men are more likely to put their careers above their families. (Not me, as you know, but I'm an outlier). This unsurprisingly leads to more successful careers yet chillier relations with their children.

Stepping back, men are simply more likely to obsessively focus on success in *anything*. Thus, even though *anyone* can edit Wikipedia, about 90% of Wikipedia editors are male. Just 6% of the most prolific editors are female.⁹ And while obsessive focus rarely leads to superlative success, *lack* of obsessive focus predictably *prevents* superlative success.

Sophisticated feminists will concede these obvious facts, then argue that our society is unfair for failing to make girls just as obsessive as boys. Some blame parents for failing to push their daughters as hard as their sons. Others will blame our whole society for failing to inspire women to pursue excellence. If either story is correct, though, why are males also over-represented at the *bottom* of society?

In any case, this is more bizarre blame-shifting. As you know, from a young age I've tried to give you and your brothers ample freedom to live

your lives as *you* think best. I never pressured any of you to pursue superlative achievement at the expense of family and fun. Was this “unfair” of me? Was it “unfair” of total strangers to leave us in peace?

c. *The Family*

What about housework and childcare? Women definitely do the lion’s share. However, it is also true that men spend more time doing paid work – pay that family men routinely use to support their families. If you look closely at the numbers – as I have – you’ll discover that married men’s and married women’s average hours of paid plus unpaid toil are almost exactly the same – at least in the modern United States.¹⁰

Admittedly, this average conceals much variation. Working moms do indeed spend more time toiling than working dads. Stay-at-home moms, in sharp contrast, spend markedly *less* time toiling than working dads.¹¹ It is worth pointing out, as well, that a great deal of housework and childcare is discretionary, anyway. Moms are their own toughest critics; which is another way of saying that if they spent 10% less time on housework and childcare, the rest of the family probably wouldn’t complain – or notice.

Even if men and women spend equal amounts of time toiling, isn’t it unfair that men get to work so much outside the home, while women are stuck home taking care of kids? You could just as easily ask, “Isn’t it unfair that women get to take care of kids, while men are stuck working outside the home?” My point: The way people feel about paid work versus childcare varies widely – and the traditional division of labor largely exists by the couple’s mutual consent. Moms usually *want* to be their kids’ primary care-giver, and almost never want to work while the dads stay home. And most dads favor the same arrangement.

Now if the traditional division of labor were *obligatory*, you might object that it is unfair to nontraditional parents of *both* genders. Happily, it's not. The traditional division is just the leading option. If you want something else, don't lash out at "society." Instead, try to preempt a marital mismatch by making your feelings known long in advance of having kids.

Some of the angriest claims of unfairness arise when parents split up – or never unite in the first place. In such cases, mothers usually provide the lion's share of childcare and financial support. Isn't this unfair? Sure, if the father actually committed to helping, and then reneged. But what if the father never even offered to contribute – or explicitly refused from the outset? At least in the United States, the government still requires an unwilling-from-the-get-go father to pay child support, which seems unfair indeed. A woman can legally choose to abort a child she does not want, but a man cannot legally refuse to fund a child he does not want.

What about gender bias in child custody cases? Not too many decades ago, the law officially favored mothers. Unless the court deemed them "unfit," women got custody. Nowadays, this blatant bias is mostly gone, yet women are still much more likely to win custody disputes.¹² As usual, though, this inequality is weak evidence of unfairness. The default explanation is that women are, on average, better and more involved parents.

Unlike the income gap, admittedly, high-quality research on the custody gap remains scarce. And unlike entrepreneurs, judges can't become billionaires by avoiding discrimination. So perhaps some of the judicial system's earlier *de jure* bias against fathers survives *de facto*.

d. *Crime and War*

Females probably endure a majority of sexual violence, though prison rape makes even that claim disputable.¹³ What is quite clear is that males endure a majority of *all* violence. For murder, the best-measured and gravest violent crime, male victims outnumber female victims by a factor of almost four to one in the United States.¹⁴ The global ratio is about the same.¹⁵

You could argue that male crime victims are more likely than women to be complicit. One of the best predictors of being a crime victim is, in fact, being a criminal – and men are far more likely to be criminals than women.¹⁶ Still, since most criminals probably *don't* deserve death, this caveat weakens but does not reverse the conclusion that most murdered innocents are male. The fairest result, naturally, would be for zero innocents of either gender to suffer. Yet the key issue for feminism is whether innocent women are more likely to be victimized than innocent men. We can't satisfactorily answer this with crime data alone.

Once we count organized warfare, though, the correct answer becomes clear. Males are *much* more likely to die in war than women. The main reason for this is plainly that males are much more likely to fight. In mild conflicts, admittedly, you could emphasize that soldiers are usually volunteers. Even if their cause is just, at least they receive compensation for the risk. In serious conflicts, however, countries routinely resort to military slavery, also known as “conscription” or “the draft.” Indeed, many countries have had military slavery during peacetime. And while a few countries enslave both men and women, the overwhelming majority of military slaves have been and continue to be male.

In 2022, your brother Simon and I toured Eastern Europe during the Ukrainian refugee crisis. In less than a month, millions of Ukrainians fled

their war-torn country. Yet among them, we saw no male refugees between the ages of 18 and 60. Why? Because the Ukrainian government refused men in this age range permission to leave. Even if they're not soldiers, they're legally required to stay behind as human shields in a savage war. Why? Because they were born male.

e. *Objectification*

Men put great emphasis on women's looks. This is undeniable and seems unfair. Physical attractiveness is only one trait out of many. How can men pay so little attention to women's virtues and personality?

Women, similarly, put great emphasis on men's success. This, too, is undeniable, and this, too, seems unfair. Career performance is only one trait out of many. How can women pay so little attention to men's virtues and personalities?

The common thread: Human beings are *superficial*. Especially for romantic partners, they tend to fixate on a tiny subset of what matters long-term. Disappointing, but on reflection, it's not as bad as it sounds. Short-term mating is more superficial than long-term mating. Human beings vary widely in their degree of superficiality. And you personally are free to vary as much as you want. Marrying a mere success object is, I warn you, simply foolish; unless your partner is loyal and fun, you will have a sad life together.

You could object that success, unlike looks, often *reflects* both virtues and personality. Hard work, determination, and ambition are all vital for personal prosperity. Physical attractiveness, in contrast, reveals little beyond itself. So while both men and women are superficial and unfair, men are somewhat more so. This argument might not matter much to someone like

you, my daughter, who has both inner and outer beauty. Still, I grant its plausibility.

4. Aggregating Unfairness

The main takeaway from the last section is that there is much less gender-based unfairness in our society than meets the eye. In some ways, women have tougher lives than men; in other ways, men have tougher lives than women. On careful examination, however, these unequal outcomes are rarely unfair. Instead, they reflect unequal performance. When men outperform women, they enjoy more success than women. When women outperform men, they enjoy more success than men.

The main exceptions: Men really are much more likely than women to renege on their promises to help support their children. While could you blame such women for failing to properly screen the fathers of their children for reliability, mistreatment of the gullible is still mistreatment. Furthermore, romantic partners occasionally do evolve in shocking ways. A father who seems totally reliable at the time of a child's conception probably has at least a 10% chance of being a terrible father nonetheless. Sad but true.

At the same time, men really are more likely than women to be the victims of violent crime. This difference may simply reflect greater male criminality. But excess male deaths in serious wars, combined with military slavery, stem almost entirely from colossal unfairness to men – the idea that men are somehow born with a duty to face mortal danger for the sake of total strangers. The somewhat plausible claim that men are even more unfairly superficial than women is minor by comparison.

What then is the big picture? The fairness of the treatment that men and women receive in our society is remarkably equal. And if there is a disparity, it is probably in women's favor. This is especially true if we ponder one last gender gap: *Men endure far more false accusations of unfairness than women do – and far more intimidation to stay silent or feign agreement in the face of false accusations.*

How can I say such a thing? Simple: Feminists in our society have the rhetorical high ground. Politicians, teachers, and journalists don't just take it for granted that our society treats men more fairly than women; they speak as if our society treats men like kings and women like dirt. This in turn leads them to habitually vilify men – and lash out at anyone who dares to dissent. Happily, these opinion leaders are only an outspoken minority of our society, but they set the tone for public life. Men continue to privately object to feminist dogma with friends, but it takes nerves of steel – or jobs of tenure – to trumpet your reservations to the world.

My point: Suppose that society treats men and women equally fairly, with one exception: Opinion leaders habitually claim that one gender's treatment is vastly worse. This rhetoric would, *ipso facto*, make society's treatment of the other gender unfair. In a world without feminism, it wouldn't be crazy to argue that society treats men *a little* more fairly than women. If you add a hyperbolic, prominent feminist movement to that world, however, you have just tipped the scales of fairness the other way.

Still, it's tempting to stonewall, "Despite all these arguments, feminism just seems true." Honestly, I feel the temptation myself. Here's what I think is afoot.

First, contra feminism, human beings take female suffering *more* seriously than male suffering.¹⁷ Consider the classic lifeboat slogan:

“Women and children first.” We expect men to be stoic and chivalrous – to gladly and silently sacrifice for the sake of women. As a result, we fixate on female suffering, even when male suffering is vastly greater. Perhaps the most notorious instance was Hillary Clinton’s 1998 statement that “Women have always been the primary victims of war. Women lose their husbands, their fathers, their sons in combat.”¹⁸ Even when the males are literally dying, it remains rhetorically easier to get people to lament the collateral misery of the women who knew the fallen. Feminism succeeds *because* it is false; claims about the unfair treatment of women capture our attention because men and women in our society especially abhor the unfair treatment of women.

Second, the feminist movement freely deploys intimidation against critics, no matter how mild or unwitting their criticism. Indeed, feminists’ standard operating procedure is to make outlandish claims, backed by thinly-veiled threats to get mad at anyone who calls their bluff. As a result, we hear little public criticism of feminism. Even people who disagree with feminist complaints often bill themselves as defenders of “true feminism,” trying to invoke this magic word as a shield. All this spawns the illusion that feminism is so intellectually impervious that critics are at a loss for words. The reality is that feminism is so rhetorically dominant that critics fear opening their mouths.

5. Feminism Around the World and Over Time

If you’re paying attention, you’ll note that when I compare how “society” treats men and women, I am largely talking about the modern United States, along with other rich, Western, English-speaking countries. If we look at

other countries and time periods, we can easily find societies that *do* blatantly treat men more fairly than women. In such societies, feminism would be true – and if you had the misfortune to live there, you should be a feminist (though even then you should definitely *not* embrace the whole Western feminist intellectual, attitudinal, and behavioral package).

Take Saudi Arabia. Until recently, every Saudi woman had a male “guardian” – typically a father, husband, brother, or uncle – who could legally forbid her to work, travel, or marry. Prior to 2019, Saudi women were not legally allowed to drive even *with* the permission of their guardians. In this system, you – but not your brothers – would be treated as a child for life. True, Saudi Arabia also has plenty of gender-neutral tyranny. They really do execute both men and women for blasphemy. Yet the Saudis’ overall treatment of women is much worse. In Saudi Arabia, I would be a feminist, though I would probably be too terrified to publicize the fact.

While Saudi Arabia is one of the most blatantly anti-female countries in the world, it may be far from the worst. The two most populous countries on Earth, China, and India have strangely imbalanced gender ratios. For every 100 girls, both China and India, have about 110 boys.¹⁹ Many observers take this as a sign of widespread female infanticide, though much of the disparity probably stems from selective abortion. Still, if even 10% of these enormous disparities reflect infanticide, millions of female Chinese and Indian babies have been murdered.²⁰ The case for feminism in such countries would be ironclad.

The same principles hold for any historical society, but proceed with caution. All earlier societies have been *much* poorer than our own. As a result, women used to endure what we would call extreme hardship. And

guess what? So did men. Before you conclude that earlier societies treated women *more unfairly* than men, therefore, you must assess how *both* genders fared. Don't just dwell on the plight of an American mother who spent twelve hours a day on housework and childcare back in 1900. Instead, compare her plight to her husband's. This won't merely give you a better historical perspective. It will highlight how much of the progress that women have enjoyed since 1900 reflects not feminist ideas, but the rising prosperity of men and women alike.

The cleverest objection to my sanguine view of gender in modern Western countries, by the way, is that feminism has become false *because of feminism*. In this view, American society in 1950 did indeed treat men much more fairly than women. Then the feminist movement arose and raised awareness. The movement didn't just change norms; it inspired governments to ban discrimination, sexual harassment, and much more. Without continued feminist pressure, governments would ease up – and the unfairness of earlier times would reemerge. According to this story, *that* is why economists detect so little gender discrimination in the labor market; not that government is unnecessary to protect women, but that government is doing its job to protect women.

What's wrong with this story? To repeat, if it were really true that businesses were paying women 20% less than equally-qualified men, then every business would have a no-brainer get-rich-quick strategy: Fire all the overpaid men and replace them with women. Laws against discrimination really are like laws against burning money: a witch-hunt against an offense that, properly measured, barely exists.

Laws against sexual harassment are more complicated. Clearly, government regulation has greatly reduced unwanted on-the-job sexual

attention. However, the government has also greatly reduced *wanted* on-the-job sexual attention. Regulation, heavily inspired by feminism, has created a workplace climate of fear and repression, where co-workers keep their romantic thoughts and feelings to themselves to protect their careers.²¹

What was the workplace like before sexual harassment laws? People who remember the old days are growing scarce, but I have debriefed some. Severe on-the-job sexual harassment was never normal, but co-workers engaged in a lot more flirting and dating. When people, usually women, received unwanted attention, they rejected the pursuer, which usually solved the problem. If that didn't work, they complained to the boss, which usually solved the problem. And if that didn't work – perhaps because the pursuer *was* the boss – the old adage of “If you don't like it here, you can quit” was the final recourse. A perfect system? Hardly. But treating adults like wicked children as today's laws do is much worse.

6. Lingering Questions

a. *Isn't patriarchy bad for everyone?* When I identify “Society treats men more fairly than women” as the core feminist doctrine, a few critics object, “No, the core feminist doctrine is that patriarchy is bad for *both* genders.” This raises two questions. First, do we actually live in a “patriarchy”? Second, assuming we live in a patriarchy, is it really bad for both genders?

Defining “patriarchy” weakly as, “A society where males are more successful than females in business, science, technology, and politics,” we plainly live in a patriarchy. Yet if, as I previously argued, this success gap largely reflects a *performance* gap, it is hard to see why this is bad for either gender, much less both genders. Why isn't the best system a meritocracy,

where the top rewards go to the highest achievers – and individuals decide for themselves if the prizes of success are worth the sacrifices?²² You could fall back on the “brainwashing” complaint – society tells men but not women to strive for success, to the detriment of both genders. But to repeat, this story can’t explain why men are over-represented at the bottom as well as the top of society.

Defining “patriarchy” strongly as, “A society where males are *unfairly* more successful than females in business, science, technology, and politics,” we don’t live in a patriarchy. Still, if we did live in patriarchy so defined, the conclusion that both genders suffer would be credible. While some men would gain from their unearned high status, the waste of female talent would impoverish men and women alike. In other words, unfairness to women is worse than it looks, because it automatically leads to economic inefficiency for humanity. This is a reasonable inference, but if society does not in fact treat women more unfairly than men, the point is moot.

b. *Doesn’t patriarchy cause suicide?* The most superficially plausible version of “Patriarchy is bad for everyone” focuses on high male suicide rates. In the United States, for example, men are now about three times as likely to kill themselves as women. Doesn’t this show that traditional gender norms and male domination drive men to despair?

Hardly. Rather, this is a case of feminist dogmatism: Heads they’re right; tails they’re right. Simple point: If women were the gender with higher suicide rates, feminists would obviously take this as support for their views. How then can the opposite pattern *also* support their views?

If patriarchy really did cause male suicide, we would expect the most traditional societies to have the highest male/female suicide ratio. The

opposite is true. Asia and Africa have the *lowest* male/female suicide ratio. The region with the highest is Europe.²³ Looking at individual countries, the patterns are all over the place. Sweden has a low male/female suicide ratio of 2.1. Iceland's, though, is 5.1. Famously traditional India's ratio is only 1.3, versus 3.3 in the United States.²⁴

Why then are men so likely to kill themselves? I could just dogmatically blame feminism for making men miserable, but that doesn't fit the facts, either. In the United States, male suicide rates today are almost the same as in 1950 when the feminist movement was barely visible.²⁵ Female suicide rates during the same period rose about 10%. Looking at the whole U.S. series, suicide rates for both genders slowly fell from 1950 to 2000. Then between 2000 and today, suicide rates rose 30% for men and 50% for women. Why did all this happen? I don't know, but blaming "patriarchy" is just a conspiracy theory that stifles healthy curiosity.

c. *Aren't we getting fairer?* Holding performance constant, it seems much easier for motivated, high-ability women to succeed in America today than in 1950. Doesn't this at least show that feminists in 1950 were correct?

Only in isolation. The labor market is probably fairer for motivated, high-ability women today – though it is even clearer that modern labor markets *contain* far more motivated, high-ability women. Yet for most women, past and present, elite jobs were never a live option – and in other major ways, modern society treats women less fairly. In 1950, the vast majority of mothers could count on the father of their children for financial and personal support. Optimistically, perhaps two-thirds of mothers could say the same today.²⁶

Again, the best approach is to methodically review and aggregate all the main alleged forms of social unfairness by gender circa 1950. If we did, I suspect we would discover that elite women were treated less fairly in 1950, but average women were treated more fairly. Main complication: In 1950, males would not have faced the feminist climate of false accusations and intimidation that they endure today. So perhaps the standard view that the unfairness gap has moved in women's favor since 1950 is right for the wrong reason. Relative unfairness against women has fallen because absolute unfairness against men has increased.

d. *What about pressure for gender conformity?* Every society has norms about "how women are supposed to act," and frowns upon women who break these norms. This isn't so bad if you *want* to conform, but what about all of the non-conformist women? Perhaps we should just think of "feminism" as the view that every woman should feel free to be herself.

The main problem with this picture is that every society also has norms about "how men are supposed to act," and frowns upon men who break these norms. And the "frowning" that men face is almost definitely more punitive and unforgiving. Childhood is much harder for the "sissy" than the "tomboy" – and this disparity likely continues into adulthood.²⁷ Treating this as a "feminist" issue is therefore strange at best. Indeed, it's in the same obtuse ballpark as Hillary Clinton's claim that women suffer the most in war, even though men do most of the dying. Yes, you should "feel free to be yourself" – and so should your brothers.

By the way, don't be surprised if feminists try to pressure you into gender *non*-conformity. While officially they praise a woman's right to

choose whatever life she wants for herself, in practice feminists tend to look down on women who choose traditional gender roles.

e. *What should you do if your ideas or work are discounted because you're a woman?* This is a question from one of my best friends. My answer: To start, never presume that such “discounting” has anything to do with your gender. Almost *every* living person feels inadequately appreciated. The simplest explanation is general human egotism. Human beings obsess over their own greatness – and neglect the greatness of others.

If you’re being honest, then, you must be mindful of the possibility that you’re overrating yourself. Yet even in the worst-case scenario – others are ignoring your manifest greatness because you’re a woman – the most constructive response is to (a) do even better, and (b) be friendly. Trying to intimidate your detractors is emotionally tempting, but rarely effective for either gender. Remember: Given how egotistical human beings are, getting them to admit their own iniquity is practically hopeless. Instead, make them feel like your success is their success. Easier said than done, yes, but still your best bet.

f. *How should you market yourself?* Many of my friends maintain that feminism is too culturally dominant to openly oppose. Instead of saying, “I’m not a feminist,” you should say, “I’m the right kind of feminist.” Perhaps they’re correct, but I’m skeptical. Unless you want to be a professional intellectual, the most prudent course is to focus on actions, not words. Don’t talk about feminism as a positive *or* a negative. Instead, do a good job and be friendly. If fanatics impose feminist loyalty tests, change the subject and avoid the testers. If reasonable people want to have a

friendly conversation about feminism, politely share your views. Ideally, you'll have tons of friends – and the people inclined to be your enemies won't realize you're alive.

Granted, this strategy hinders efforts to network with feminists, an influential faction in modern society. But branding yourself as “the right kind of feminist” would probably alienate this faction even more. The good news: Firmly rejecting feminism will help you network with *male* co-workers and mentors, who will probably continue to exert greater real-world influence. The key issue: The climate of strident feminism has made potentially helpful men afraid to work with and mentor women.²⁸ You're just one individual, so you can't expect to personally fix this sad situation. What you can do, however, is market yourself as an *exception*: I don't bite; fear me not; I assume the best of others; I'm a can-do person with a good sense of humor. Feminists predictably resent women who use their “I'm not one of those feminists” attitude to bond with male co-workers and mentors. This suggests to me that the “I'm not one of those feminists” strategy works. Use it.

g. *How can so many feminists be so wrong?* How can an intellectual movement as vast as feminism be so wrong? Simple: First, the ideas of feminism are emotionally appealing. The ideas give every angry woman and every guilty man a bearded scapegoat for the imperfection of the world. Second, the community of feminists is socially active. Day after day, the community comforts believers and intimidates unbelievers. If this seems facile, note that the same goes for almost every organized religion. To be blunt, if there are N intellectually incompatible religions on Earth, at least $(N-1)$ must be false. How then do all the false religions survive? By offering

emotionally appealing ideas, plus communities that welcome the faithful and decry heretics and infidels.

h. *Who are the best feminists?* The most intellectually respectable feminists, in my view, are almost all left-leaning labor economists.²⁹ Unlike other feminists, they've done the necessary math to grasp that gender success gaps often reflect gender performance gaps. Indeed, most such feminists concede that gender performance gaps now explain *almost* all gender success gaps. How, then, do they remain feminists? By replacing feminist "facts" with feminist *values*. If statistics say that the true gender wage gap is one-fourth as big as most feminists believe, left-leaning labor economists' go-to frame is, "A disturbingly large wage gap remains," not "A disturbingly large exaggeration of the wage gap remains." Similarly, in the face of the inevitable imperfections of empirical work, left-leaning labor economists will announce, "We cannot rule out a significant role for gender discrimination," when they could just as easily declare, "We cannot rule out zero role for gender discrimination" or "We cannot rule out reverse gender discrimination." What's wrong with the best feminists, in short, is that they casually accept the conventional view that women's suffering counts much more than men's – and interpret their impressive knowledge through that distorted lens.

7. Feminism and You

Suppose I'm thoroughly right about feminism. Still, Vali, you could fairly ask, "Dad, why do you care so much about what I think about this issue?" I've written you precisely one essay-length letter. Why was the topic,

“Don’t be a feminist,” instead of “Don’t be a socialist,” or “Don’t be a pessimist”? And why didn’t I write the same letter to your brothers?

My answer: Out of all the letters I could write to you, this one will do *you* the most good. And as your father, I am eager to help you.

What’s so helpful about your father telling you about the flaws of feminism?

First, feminism is a life-tarnishing creed for the adherent because it makes a virtue out of wallowing in antipathy and self-pity. While many self-styled feminists are kind and happy, this is largely because they don’t take their doctrine seriously. Earnest feminism reliably leads to dire character flaws. Earnest feminism leads you to treat men unjustly – to reflexively blame them both collectively and individually for the sheer imperfection of life. Earnest feminism leads you to treat non-feminists unjustly – to respond to reasonable objections with condescension and thinly-veiled threats. Earnest feminism turns you against your family – to see the father and brothers who have always loved and cared for you as part of “the enemy.” And earnest feminism leads you to treat *yourself* poorly – to see yourself as a victim, whose only reliable allies are other earnest feminists.

Second, I predict my words will dramatically change the way you think. Feminism has become so culturally dominant, especially for young women, that you’ll probably end up a feminist unless I talk you out of it. Yet the intellectual case for feminism is so weak that I think one well-crafted letter *will* talk you out of it. Or at least leave you with healthy skepticism.

My daughter, life is already going to give you some indisputable reasons to feel angry and sad. The wise path is to meet adversity with an optimistic and can-do perspective. Remember that bad things are the

exception, not the rule – and plan ahead to make these exceptions rarer still. In practice, feminism spurns the wise path. It trains you to see unfairness where none exists. And the main remedy feminism trains you to deploy is the high-risk, low-return strategy of intimidation. Yes, you *might* terrify others into doing as you wish, but you’re more likely to lose friends and alienate people. In any case, as I’ve taught you, if the only way to “win” is to treat innocent people like dirt, you should choose to lose.

If “treating innocent people like dirt” sounds like hyperbole, please google the hashtag #NotAllMen. Whatever their flaws, most intellectual movements make an effort to distinguish wrong-doers from bystanders. When conservatives complain about black crime, for example, they usually go out of their way to acknowledge that most blacks are *not* criminals. Almost all intellectual movements are apologetic if they accidentally conflate bystanders with wrong-doers. If a conservative casually remarks, “Blacks commit so much crime,” and a listener responds, “Are you saying that all blacks are criminals?,” the conservative will almost certainly rush to reply with a humble, “Of course not.”

Feminist thinkers, in contrast, routinely and self-righteously do otherwise. When they complain about male unfairness, they almost never go out of their way to acknowledge that most men treat women fairly. And when critics point out that “Not all men treat women unfairly,” feminist thinkers refuse to humbly concede the point. Instead, they treat this request for common decency as another affront against women – and respond with a sarcastic hashtag. In fact, feminist thinkers often speak as if there *are* no innocent bystanders here because failing to devote your life to feminism is itself a grave offense. If this sounds fanatical, it is.

I'm perfectly happy to grant that #NotAllFeminists are fanatics. Most self-identified feminists are probably just regular people who don't like to see women mistreated. Unfortunately, most vocal feminists *are* fanatics – and rank-and-file feminists tend to defer to them. If this sounds overly grim, try googling reactions to this very essay. I predict that almost all of the feminist responses won't just fail to engage my main arguments. They will have a hysterical tone, and heap personal abuse on a man they never met because he challenged their worldview. I wouldn't be surprised if they claimed I was a bad father. Wild accusations despite severe ignorance; that's fanaticism for you.

And to belabor the obvious, being a fanatic is awful – a pathway to being wrong and doing wrong. One of the best ways to avoid error and injustice is to acknowledge that human beings are prone to error and injustice – and to remember that you're a human being. If someone politely tells you you're wrong, you should listen carefully and calmly. In a word, rationally. If someone angers you, you should strive to treat them carefully and calmly. In a word, justly. Some feminists may dismiss rationality and justice as "male" virtues, but that's one of the greatest insults to women even uttered. Rationality is not a male virtue. Justice is not a male virtue. They are human virtues. And I trust you will practice them. After all, Vali, you are my daughter.

Acknowledgments: *Thanks to many anonymous friends who provided detailed and thoughtful comments. In a better world, I'd list all their names.*

April 20, 2022

Notes

1. Or as this article in *The Economist* opens, “To be a feminist is simply to believe that everybody should be treated equally, regardless of sex. It means you think that there should be equality of the sexes economically, socially, politically and personally.” Bates, Laura. “How to Convince Sceptics of the Value of Feminism.” *The Economist*, August 13, 2018.
2. “Feminism Survey.” *The Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation*, January, 2016.
3. A stickler could append, “even though both genders ought to be treated equally.” Wikipedia conventionally defines feminism as, “a range of socio-political movements and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes,” but then more thoughtfully adds, “Feminism incorporates the position that societies prioritize the male point of view, and that women are treated unjustly within those societies.” “Feminism.” *Wikipedia*, May 12, 2022; Caplan, Bryan. “Against Argumentative Definitions.” *Econlog*, November 10, 2021. Almost any self-identified feminist work you examine will heavily focus on society’s alleged mistreatment of women relative to men. Some of the more readable works include *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, *Feminism Is For Everyone* by bell hooks, and *Good and Mad* by Rebecca Traister.

4. The single best work here probably remains Farrell, Warren. *Women Can't Hear What Men Don't Say: Destroying Myths, Creating Love*, 1999.
5. For a quite comprehensive second list that does *not* take this questionable shortcut, see Benatar, David, *The Second Sexism*.
6. Caplan, Bryan. "Weeks 12-13: Discrimination." *Econ 321: Labor Economics*.
7. The most thoughtful and eloquent analysis, though, is by political scientist Warren Farrell, in his *Why Men Earn More: The Startling Truth Behind the Pay Gap – and What Women Can Do About It*. For my own humble contribution, see Caplan, Bryan. "The College Premium vs. The Marriage Premium: A Case of Double Standards." *Econlog*, April 5, 2018.
8. Indeed, even ignoring family status, the estimated male-female gap falls to less than 10% after adjusting for industry and occupation. This has been true for over three decades. Blau, Francine, and Kahn, Lawrence. "The Gender Wage Gap: Extent, Trends, and Explanations." *Journal of Economic Literature* 55, 2017. Counting family status, Blau and Kahn find that the male-female gap was 7% in 1989, 8% in 1998, and 7% in 2010. (Personal email from Lawrence Kahn)
9. "Gender Bias on Wikipedia." *Wikipedia*, 15 May, 2022.
10. Bianchi, Suzanne, John Robinson, and Melissa Milke. *The Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2006. Caveat: Warren Farrell 1999, pp. 85-123 plausibly argues that official statistics undercount men's household work.

11. Bianchi, Suzanne, et al. "Housework: Who Did, Does or Will Do It, and How Much Does it Matter?" *Social Forces* 91, 2012.
12. Grall, Timothy. "Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2017." *United States Census Bureau*, May, 2020.
13. Rantala, Ramona. "Sexual Victimization Reported By Adult Correctional Authorities, 2012-15." *US DOJ Special Report 2018*.
14. Reported victimization rates by gender are much more equal for less serious violence, but this could easily reflect our tendency to define violence against women more broadly than violence against men. "Crime in the U.S. 2019." *FBI*, July 20, 2020.
15. "Global Study on Homicide." *United Nations: Office on Drugs and Crime*, 2019.
16. Pizarro, Jesenia, et al. "Assessing the Interaction between Offender and Victim Criminal Lifestyles and Homicide Type." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 39, 2011.
17. Clark, Cory, and Bo Winegard. "The Myth of Pervasive Misogyny." *Quillette*, December 17, 2021; Kouloglou, Maria. "Considering the Male Disposability Hypothesis." *Quillette*, October 29, 2021.
18. "A Quote by Hillary Rodham Clinton." *Goodreads*.
19. Published by C. Textor. "China: Gender Ratio by Age Group." *Statista*, November 24, 2021; "Gender Ratio in India." *India Sex Ratio 2021*, Statistics Time.
20. To be precise, millions *more* female than male babies have been murdered. Observed Chinese and Indian sex ratios are consistent with high levels of male infanticide, as long as female infanticide is even higher. Note that if sex-based abortion is 10% as unfair as murder, the

total unfairness of the abortions should roughly equal the total unfairness of the murders.

21. For further discussion, see Caplan, Bryan. “Love Is Love: Workplace Edition.” *Bet On It*, March 21, 2022.
22. True, you could consider some of these endeavors to be so corrupt that success is actually shameful. This, as you probably know, is my view of politics.
23. “Gender Differences in Suicide.” *Wikipedia*, May 9, 2022.
24. “Suicide Rate by Country 2022.” *World Population Review* 2022.
25. Elflein, John. “Suicide Death Rate U.S. by Gender 1950-2018.” *Statista*, July 1, 2021.
26. Only 60% of children are now born to married parents, and about 40% of marriages end in divorce. Some non-marital fathers, and more divorced fathers, scrupulously support their children, but the overall picture isn’t pretty. “Dramatic Increase in the Proportion of Births Outside of Marriage in the United States from 1990 to 2016.” *Child Trends*; Stevenson, Betsey, and Justin Wolfers. “Trends in Marital Stability.” *Research Handbook on the Economics of Family Law*, 2011.
27. At my request, famed sex researcher Michael Bailey informally polled a large group of his peers on this point and found strong agreement, though admittedly none could point to any definitive work on the issue.
28. Caplan, Bryan. “Mentoring: The Rationality of Fear.” *Econlib*, February 8, 2020.
29. Better yet, though, are staunch critics of feminism like Warren Farrell who still call themselves “feminists”. But for me to call them “the best feminists” is a cop-out because I don’t really consider them feminists.

The Uniformity and Exclusion Movement

The Ministry of Peace concerns itself with war, the Ministry of Truth with lies, the Ministry of Love with torture and the Ministry of Plenty with starvation.

—George Orwell, 1984

Earth houses a multitude of political movements vastly worse than the “social justice” (or “wokeness”) crusade. North Korean and Chinese communism, Islamic fundamentalism, and Russian nationalism all have far worse intentions and have done far more harm than wokeness ever will. Even in the United States, anti-immigrant conservatism has unjustly ruined far more lives in the last four years than Social Justice Warriors are likely to ruin in my lifetime. Still, there is one way in which “social justice” stands out from the competition: Out of all the major political movements on Earth, none is more Orwellian than “social justice.” No other movement is so dedicated to achieving the opposite of what its slogans proclaim – or so aggressive in the warping of language. While every ideology is prone to a little doublethink, “social justice” is doublethink at its core.

To see what I’m talking about, picture North Korean and Chinese communism.¹ Their official story is that totalitarian rule by the Communist

Party is wonderful – and they impose totalitarian rule by their respective Communist Parties. The official story of Islamic fundamentalism is that fanatical Muslim theologians should enforce the teachings of a 7th-century book – and when in power they do so. The official story of Russian nationalism is that authoritarian Russians should rule Russia with an iron hand and sadistically dominate neighboring countries – and they do so with gusto.

In contrast, the official story of the social justice movement is that we should swear eternal devotion to “diversity and inclusion.” Yet in practice they strive to achieve *uniformity* via *exclusion*. The recent University of California scandal is an elegant example.² In affected departments, job candidates had to write a “diversity and inclusion statement.” Unless candidates vigorously supported the social justice movement through word and action, the faculty never even got to see their applications. How vigorously? To reach “the next stage of review,” applicants needed a minimum average score of 11 on their rubric for “Assessing Candidate Contributions to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging.” Since a rank-and-file dogmatic ideologue would probably only score a 9, this cutoff predictably causes ideological uniformity of Orwellian dimensions.

More generally:

1. The diversity and inclusion movement is nominally devoted to fervent “anti-racism.” In practice, however, they are the *only* prominent openly racist movement I have encountered during my life in the United States. Nowadays they routinely mock and dismiss critics for the color of their skin – then accuse those they mock and dismiss of “white fragility.” Just one prominent recent case:

The signatories, many of them white, wealthy, and endowed with massive platforms, argue that they are afraid of being silenced, that so-called cancel culture is out of control, and that they fear for their jobs and free exchange of ideas, even as they speak from one of the most prestigious magazines in the country.³

2. The diversity and inclusion movement doesn't just bizarrely redefine racism as "prejudice plus power." Since their movement combines explicit racial prejudice with great power, they neatly fit their own Newspeak definition.
3. A popular social justice lawn sign includes the plank, "Be kind to all." Yet the movement greets even mild criticism from friends with hostility, and firm disagreement with rage. Plus the harshest punishments they can arrange, especially ostracism from high-skilled employment.
4. While we're on the subject of "being kind to all," let me point out that making harsh, ill-founded accusations against any large, unselective group – such as a race, gender, or age bracket – is the opposite of kind.^{4*} Yet the "social justice" movement hasn't just heaped collective guilt on whites, males, and "the old." It has heaped scorn on even mild pushback like "Not all men are sexist." Basic kindness, in contrast, enjoins you to (a) calmly investigate the validity of your accusations before voicing them; (b) carefully distinguish between misunderstandings and malice; (c) reassure innocent bystanders before you call out the demonstrably guilty.⁵

5. The “Love is love” slogan is comparably Orwellian. Thanks to #MeToo, almost every person who values his job is now too terrified even to meekly ask a co-worker out on a date. Where is the love there? When faced with compelling evidence that male managers were responding to the climate of fear by avoiding mentoring and social contact with female co-workers, the #MeToo reaction was not to mend fences but to make further threats.⁶

6. “Science is real” would also bring a grim smile to Orwell’s face. The diversity and inclusion movement shows near-zero patience for the pile of scientific research that estimates the share of group performance gaps that stem from discrimination versus other factors. Instead, they (a) ignore the science; (b) speak as if science shows the discrimination share is 100%; and (c) treat people who discuss the actual science as if they’re personally guilty of discrimination.⁷ The same goes for any unwelcome scientific conclusions about gender, sexuality, academic performance, etc. Either embrace the foregone conclusions of “social justice,” or risk the wrath of the movement. Just beneath the propaganda lies uniformity via exclusion.

7. What’s the relationship between Orwellian language and the motte-and-bailey fallacy?⁸ Quite distant. Orwellian language amounts to saying the *opposite* of the truth. Motte-and-bailey, in contrast, is about strategically toggling between moderate and extreme versions of your creed. E.g., sometimes feminism is the moderate view that “Women should be treated as fairly as men”; yet the rest of the time, feminism is the extreme view that “Women should be treated as fairly as men, but totally aren’t in this depraved sexist society.”⁹

8. If all this is true, how come I'm not too scared of Big Brother to write it? Tenure is a big part of it. The official point of tenure is to make professors feel free to voice unpopular truths – and I'm all about unpopular truths. Still, I'm no martyr. If I were looking for an academic job, I would shut up. I hope many tenure-seeking readers feel the same yearning to voice unpopular truths with impunity, though I fear your numbers are few.

9. What's the least Orwellian feature of the “social justice” movement? Support for illegal immigrants, of course. First World countries really do treat illegal immigrants like subhumans, and to its credit the social justice movement offers them moral support with the poetic slogan, “No human being is illegal.”¹⁰ Yet sadly, the *volume* of this moral support is barely audible, because the movement has so many higher priorities. If its activists took the immense moral energy they waste on costumes, jokes, and careless speech, and redirected it toward the cause of free migration, I'd forgive their Orwellian past today.

10. Meta-question: Why do Orwellian movements exist at all? Why doesn't each movement say what it means and mean what it says? “Marketing” is the easy answer: When your true goals are awful, you resort to deceptively pleasant packaging to keep forward momentum. While this story makes sense, it's incomplete. The most Orwellian movements actively *revel* in the contradiction between word and deed – and even in the contradiction between word and word. The best explanation is that submission to an Orwellian creed is a grade-A loyalty test. Insisting that all your members admit that “The sky is blue” doesn't weed out the doubters and fair-weather soldiers. Insisting that all your members admit that “The sky is *green*” or

“There is no sky,” in contrast, selects for fanatics and yes-folk. And sadly, those are the sorts of people movements like “diversity and inclusion” appreciate.

* “Social justice” is of course a *selective* movement. You can disaffiliate anytime you like – and if you don’t want to be blamed for the poor behavior of your compatriots, you should.

August 5, 2020

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Communism.” *Econlib*, August 12, 2020.
2. Cochrane, John. “Wokeademia.” *The Grumpy Economist*, January, 2020.
3. The Objective, et al. “A More Specific Letter on Justice and Open Debate.” *The Objective*, July 10, 2020.
4. Caplan, Bryan. “The Identity of Shame.” *EconLog*, October 30, 2014.
5. Caplan, Bryan. “Malevolence and Misunderstanding.” *EconLog*, September 17, 2019; Caplan, Bryan. “Sorry, Innocent Bystanders.” *EconLog*, August 31, 2019.
6. Caplan, Bryan. “Social Anxiety, #MeToo, and Disaster.” *EconLog*, May 26, 2020; Caplan, Bryan. “Mentoring: The Rationality of Fear.” *EconLog*, February 5, 2020.
7. Heckman, James. “Detecting Discrimination.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Spring, 1998.

8. Alexander, Scott. "Social Justice and Words, Words, Words." *Slate Star Codex*, July, 2014.
9. Caplan, Bryan. "Against Argumentative Definitions." *EconLog*, February 20, 2018.
10. Caplan, Bryan. "Tell Me the Difference Between Jim Crow and Immigration Restrictions." *EconLog*, March 7, 2012.

Anti-Communism and Anti-Racism

I hate Communism. I consider Communists to be the moral approximates of Nazis.¹ I might talk to a youthful Communist, but after the excuse of youth passes, I deem Communists beyond redemption.

Even so, if George Mason University adopted an official Anti-Communist policy, I would oppose it.

Why? All of the following reasons.

1. George Mason University is part of the government, and as such ought to scrupulously respect freedom of speech, thought, and association. And in practice, an official Anti-Communist policy is almost certain to trample these freedoms. Once you officially declare that Communists are utterly unwelcome on campus, the impulse to officially crush them without mercy is strong. And the willingness to shield them from *unofficial* persecution practically vanishes.

2. The total number of bona fide Communists at GMU is tiny. So if you identify Communists accurately, a big Anti-Communist crusade would be an absurd overreaction. Not only would it whip up hysteria over a minor problem. It would distract scarce attention from serious problems.

3. Given the near-absence of bona fide Communists, a big Anti-Communist crusade would swiftly broaden the definition of “Communism” to include a wide swath of the Left. And most people on the Left are *not*

morally in the same league as Nazis. Not even close. So the Anti-Communist policy would end up persecuting vast numbers of flawed but tolerably decent human beings.

4. Once the re-definition of “Communism” starts to snowball, people will self-censor to avoid becoming victims of semantic inflation. So the policy doesn’t merely persecute people for racist leanings; it stifles the creation and evaluation of any idea that a paranoid fanatic might *interpret* as “Communist.”* Universities should be especially horrified by this consequence because universities are supposed to be centers for the creation and objective evaluation of ideas.

So why bring this up? Like many institutions of higher education, George Mason University has adopted an official Anti-Racist policy. And I firmly oppose it.

Why? All of the following reasons.

1. George Mason University is part of the government, and as such ought to scrupulously respect freedom of speech, thought, and association. And in practice, an official Anti-Racist policy is almost certain to trample these freedoms. Once you officially declare that racists are utterly unwelcome on campus, the impulse to officially crush them without mercy is strong. And the willingness to shield them from *unofficial* persecution practically vanishes.

2. The total number of bona fide racists at GMU is tiny. So if you identify racists accurately, a big Anti-Racist crusade would be an absurd overreaction. Not only would it whip up hysteria over a minor problem. It would distract scarce attention from serious problems.

3. Given the near-absence of bona fide racists, a big Anti-Racist crusade would swiftly broaden the definition of “racism” to include a wide swath of the non-Left. And most people on the non-Left are *not* morally in the same league as Nazis. Not even close. So the Anti-Racist policy would end up persecuting vast numbers of flawed but tolerably decent human beings.

4. Once the re-definition of “racism” starts to snowball, people will self-censor to avoid becoming victims of semantic inflation. So the policy doesn’t merely persecute people for non-leftist leanings; it stifles the creation and evaluation of any idea that a paranoid fanatic might *interpret* as “racist.” Universities should be especially horrified by this consequence because universities are supposed to be centers for the creation and objective evaluation of ideas.

Are there any crucial disanalogies between Anti-Communism and Anti-Racism? Indeed. Most obviously: Communism is a bloodthirsty totalitarian creed. Only an extreme tail of racists (Nazis, most famously) have been comparably bloodthirsty and totalitarian. The typical racist is morally comparable to a socialist who dislikes businesspeople and the rich.² Both are unfair and unreasonable, but – unlike Communists and Nazis – neither is beyond redemption.

Final question: Would I still have opposed a GMU Anti-Communist policy even in the depths of the Cold War?³ Yes. Reasons #1, #3, and #4 would still clearly apply, and #2 was at least debatable. That suffices.

* An insider once told me that a critic told him that *I* was a “Communist.” And vainly tried to get me disinvited from a talk. Because I wrote *The Case*

against Education. No joke!

May 3, 2021

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Moral Approximates.” *EconLog*, February 19, 2020.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Right-Wing Grievance Studies.” *EconLog*, October 9, 2018.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “Loyalty Oaths Compared: An Orwellian Exercise.” *EconLog*, September 14, 2020.

Against Argumentative Definitions

Suppose I define socialism as, “a system of totalitarian control over the economy, leading inevitably to mass poverty and death.” As a detractor of socialism, this is superficially tempting. But it’s sheer folly, for two distinct reasons.

First, this plainly isn’t what most socialists mean by “socialism.” When socialists call for socialism, they’re rarely requesting totalitarianism, poverty, and death. And when non-socialists listen to socialists, that’s rarely what they hear, either.

Second, if you buy this definition, there’s no point studying actual socialist regimes to see if they in fact are “totalitarian” or “inevitably lead to mass poverty and death.” Mere words tell you what you need to know.

What’s the problem? The problem is that I’ve provided an *argumentative definition* of socialism. Instead of rigorously distinguishing between *what we’re talking about* and *what we’re saying about it*, an argumentative definition deliberately interweaves the two.

The hidden hope, presumably, is that if we control the way people use words, we’ll also control what people think about the world. And it is plainly possible to trick the naive using these semantic tactics. But the epistemic cost is high: You preemptively end the conversation with anyone who substantively disagrees with you – and cloud your own thinking in the

process. It's far better to neutrally define socialism as, say, "Government ownership of most of the means of production," or maybe, "The view that each nation's wealth is justly owned collectively by its citizens." You can quibble with these definitions, but people can accept either definition regardless of their position on socialism itself.

Modern discussions are riddled with argumentative definitions, but the most prominent instance, lately, is feminism. Google "feminism," and what do you get? The top hit: "the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes." I've heard many variants on this: "the theory that men and women should be treated equally," or even "the radical notion that women are people."

What's argumentative about these definitions? Well, in this 2016 Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation survey, 40% of women and 67% of men did *not* consider themselves "feminists."¹ But over 90% of both genders agreed that "men and women should be social, political, and economic equals." If Google's definition of feminism conformed to standard English usage, these patterns would make very little sense. Imagine a world where 90% of men say they're "bachelors," but only 40% say they're "unmarried."

What would a non-argumentative definition of feminism look like? Ideally, feminists, non-feminists, and anti-feminists could all endorse it. If that's asking too much, all these groups should at least be able to accept the proposed definition as a rough approximation of the position they affirm or deny. My preferred candidate:

feminism: the view that society generally treats men more fairly than women

What's good about my definition?

First, the definition doesn't include everyone who thinks that our society treats women unfairly *to some degree*. In the real world, of course, every member of every group experiences unfairness on occasion.

Second, a large majority of self-identified feminists hold the view I ascribe to them. Indeed, if someone said, "I'm a feminist, but I think society generally treats *women* more fairly than *men*," most listeners would simply be confused.

Third, a large majority of self-identified non-feminists *disbelieve* the view I ascribe to feminists. If you think, "Society treats both genders equally well," or "Society treats women more fairly than men," you're highly unlikely to see yourself as a feminist.

At this point, you could declare, "Given all the #MeToo revelations, it's obvious that society *does* treat men more fairly than women." Or, "Men are vastly more likely to be violently killed than women, so it's obvious that society treats women more fairly than men." Similarly, you could declare, "Since women earn x% less than men, society treats men more fairly than women" or "Since men are jailed nine times more often than women, society treats women more fairly than men." (In both cases, naturally, someone else could respond, "After basic statistical corrections, these gaps go away.")

And you know what? Despite their overconfidence and impatience, all of these statements are on point. They're real arguments, not semantic trickery. If you calmly collect and carefully quantify a few hundred such arguments, you won't just know whether feminism is true. You'll know how close the other side is to being right.

February 20, 2018

Notes

1. “Feminism Survey.” *The Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation*, January, 2016.

Repealing Political Discrimination

Most skilled American workers are now at least somewhat afraid to criticize fashionable left-wing views. They feel quite fearful to do so on the job and fairly fearful to do so on social media. One tempting way to quell this high anxiety is to pass new laws against political discrimination. Washington, DC already has such a law:

[T]he District of Columbia Human Rights Act prohibits all employers in the District from refusing to hire, terminating, or otherwise discriminating against any individual with respect to his or her “compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment” on the basis of the individual’s political affiliation. D.C. Code § 2-1402.11.

Before passing a new law, however, one should always ask, “Can we accomplish the same end by repealing – or liberalizing – an existing law?” And in this case, the answer is clearly yes.

But first, let’s back up. Why are high-skilled employers almost uniformly eager to enforce left-wing fashions, such as adopting an official “anti-racist” philosophy?¹ Sincere commitment is part of the reason, but far from the whole story. *Political philosophy is too variable to explain such uniform workplace policies.* A better story, in my view, is that almost all

employers – left, right, and in-between – fear race and gender discrimination lawsuits.² And since their inception, such lawsuits have been sliding down a slippery slope.

The slippery slope looks something like this:

1. The law initially bans conscious decisions by employers to base hiring, promotion, or compensation on race or gender.
2. Discrimination gradually gets reinterpreted to include “unconscious” behavior with similar effects.
3. The next step is to blame employers for *saying* “the wrong thing,” even if there’s no discernable effect on workers’ objective career outcomes.
4. Then you blame employers for failing to deter their employees from saying “the wrong thing” to *each other*. This is when workers go from looking over their shoulder before they say something negative about a specific person, to looking over their shoulder before they say anything that would upset their most hypersensitive colleague.
5. Finally, you blame employers for failing to induce employees to say “the *right* thing” loudly and often. In other words, for failing to build a “culture of inclusion.”

Why has the slope been so slippery? Because if you’re doing less to “fight discrimination” than other firms, you worry that you might be perceived as “soft on discrimination” and get sued. (And if you do *more* to “fight discrimination” than other firms, even better). You definitely don’t want to loudly announce, “We’ve gone far enough.” Such words are financially dangerous. As I’ve said before:

Imagine what would happen if a firm's top brass loudly declared that, "Discrimination simply isn't a problem here" – and routinely fired complainers for contradicting the party line. Picture a firm blanketed in propaganda telling workers to "Be color-blind," "Laugh it off," and "No one likes a tattle-tale." A small business in a conservative area might get away with this for a few years, but a Fortune 500 company that stuck to its right-wing guns would go down in flames.³

You could argue that employers still overreact to the risk of lawsuits. I'm sympathetic; contrary to what you've heard, even hiring by IQ is fairly safe. But there's no need to resolve this debate here because what I'm going to propose is similarly good at defusing both justified and unjustified fear.

My proposal:

1. Amend discrimination law to explicitly state: "Political speech by employers or employees, on or off the job, shall never be considered a form or indicator of 'discrimination.' 'Political speech' includes the expression of any allegedly racist or sexist views."
2. For further teeth, add: "Any employee who lodges any formal complaint – internal or external – about a co-worker or employer's political speech forfeits any right to sue that employer for discrimination for any reason whatsoever." This preserves firms' right to handle offensive speech internally; they can still fire you for singing Hitler's praises on the job. But it also gives firms a free hand to handle these internal complaints as they see fit, without fear of legal blowback or second-guessing. In fact, it gives firms an incentive to urge employees to voice their complaints internally to ensure that the firm *won't* have to deal with such complaints in court.

Most people, I suspect, will object that these legal changes go too far. Since I think discrimination laws do little to reduce genuine discrimination, I obviously disagree. But I'm unlikely to persuade such people here.

On the other hand, many who share my concerns about freedom of expression will object that my proposed legal changes don't go far enough. Under my system, stridently left-wing employers can continue to impose a rigid orthodoxy. Toning down the fear of lawsuits only changes the behavior of employers who were motivated by fear in the first place.

Fair enough, but I maintain that my proposal strikes a reasonable balance.

Reducing the threat of lawsuits will restore variety by reviving competition. Strident left-wing workplaces aren't a big deal as long as we unbelievers can take our labor and go elsewhere at a reasonable cost. And yes, strident left-wing employers have rights, too. If they want to spend every Friday doing struggle sessions, they should be free to do so.

Other employers, however, shouldn't lose sleep over lawsuits if they offer their workers a more hospitable experience. While I'm not sure, I predict that my proposed revisions of the existing discrimination law would lead to robust competition between employers to create workplaces where no one walks on eggshells. Since worker preferences vary, we will witness a wide range of options. But since only a few fanatics savor stifling left-wing dogma, we'll no longer witness much of that.

I for one have already seen enough stifling left-wing dogma to last a lifetime.

March 24, 2021

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Uniformity and Exclusion Movement.” *EconLog*, August 5, 2020.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “The Missing Right-Wing Firms: A Beckerian Puzzle.” *EconLog*, September 22, 2020.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “The Missing Right-Wing Firms: A Beckerian Puzzle.” *EconLog*, September 22, 2020.
4. Caplan, Bryan. “Four Big Facts About Hiring and IQ.” *EconLog*, July 19, 2013; Caplan, Bryan. “IQ and Hiring: Does the Law Matter?” *EconLog*, April 5, 2013.

Implicit and Structural Witchery

You're back in Salem during the 1690s. After an exhaustive hunt for witches, the Lord High Witch Hunter files a bombshell report: Despite his best efforts, he's failed to find any witches in Salem. Don't imagine, though, that the fight against witchery is over. During his investigation, the Lord High Witch Hunter uncovered an enormous volume of "implicit witchery" and "structural witchery." For example, residents of Salem occasionally skip church or lose interest during the sermon. That's implicit witchery, pure and simple. Even worse, some leading merchants happily trade with Catholics and pagans. That's structural witchery at the highest levels of society.

If you're part of this society, you'd better not laugh. That's implicit witchery, too. For anyone else, however, the Lord High Witch Hunter's report is absurd. The magistrate launches a massive witchhunt. He fails to detect actual witches. So he redefines "witchery" as a "Lack of single-minded devotion to my faith." Why bother with this farce? To make a thinly-veiled threat: If you're not part of the solution to witchery, you're an implicit/structural witch. And will be burned like a witch.

Similarly, imagine that during the McCarthy era you fail to uncover any actual Communists. The Lord High McCarthyite could admit he was wrong, but where's the fun in that? Wouldn't it be better to declare that

you've discovered a massive dose of "implicit Communism" and "structural Communism"? As long as your society fears you, anything could count. Perhaps support for progressive taxes is implicit Communism. Perhaps the overrepresentation of left-wing academics in state-funded universities is structural Communism. Yes, you can cry, "Bait-and-switch." But that sounds dangerously close to implicit Communism.

Or suppose you're in modern Iran. The Lord High Inquisitor hunts for atheists, but can't find any. So he declares war on implicit atheism and structural atheism, which abound even in the Islamic Republic. Shocking? Not really, because almost anything qualifies as implicit atheism or structural atheism. If this is such an obvious scam, how come hardly anyone in Iran says so? Fear. Minimizing the danger of implicit atheism is a prime example of implicit atheism.

In the modern West, hardly anyone worries about in-the-flesh witches, Communists, or atheists, much less implicit or structural versions of these creeds. But that's because the targets have changed, not because the age of moral panic is over. And while the list of targets is long, racists and sexists are plainly at the top. The most obvious result is that people spend ample time trying to find racist and sexist individuals. In practice, however, this is as frustrating as trying to find witches in Salem. People today are about as likely to declare themselves racists and sexists as people in 17th-century Massachusetts were to declare themselves brides of Satan. Part of the reason, no doubt, is fear; avowed racists do get punched in the face, after all. The main reason, though, is that almost no one sympathizes with creeds that almost everyone hates.

So what are you supposed to do if you want to continue the good fight against social ills you've already practically driven to extinction? Move the

goalposts all the way to Mars. These days, the world's best detectives would struggle to find outright racists and sexists. Yet implicit racism, structural racism, implicit sexism, and structural sexism will always be in plain sight because the definition expands as the phenomenon contracts.

September 9, 2020

Orwellian Othering

I recently characterized “diversity and inclusion” as a deeply Orwellian movement – doublethink all the way:

Out of all the major political movements on Earth, none is more Orwellian than “social justice.” No other movement is so dedicated to achieving the opposite of what its slogans proclaim – or so aggressive in the warping of language.

For example:

The diversity and inclusion movement is nominally devoted to fervent “anti-racism.” In practice, however, they are the only prominent openly racist movement I have encountered during my life in the United States. Nowadays they routinely mock and dismiss critics for the color of their skin – then accuse those they mock and dismiss of “white fragility.”¹

Recently, I noticed yet another fine mess of diversity and inclusion doublethink: the crusade against “othering.” What does “othering” mean? *Defining other groups of human beings as objectionably different in order to rationalize the poor treatment they receive at your hands.*

The crusade against “othering” has become a prominent component of the diversity and inclusion movement, with over 1.5M google hits for this odd neologism.

The most noted skirmish of the anti-othering crusade happened in an English class at Iowa State, where the syllabus gave this now-notorious “GIANT WARNING”:

GIANT WARNING: any instances of othering that you participate in intentionally (racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, sorophobia, transphobia, classism, mocking of mental health issues, body shaming, etc) in class are grounds for dismissal from the classroom. The same goes for any papers/projects: you cannot choose any topic that takes at its base that one side doesn’t deserve the same basic human rights as you do (ie: no arguments against gay marriage, abortion, Black Lives Matter, etc).²

Yes, the media scandal only happened because the story was atypically dramatic. The professor was even ordered to fix her syllabus and “provided additional information regarding the First Amendment policies of the university.” Yet the “othering” meme – and the attendant crusade – are already commonplace in the humanities and social sciences.

What is so Orwellian about this crusade? *The fact that most of those who denounce “othering” exemplify the practices they denounce.* The diversity and inclusive movement has a broad list of odious outsiders they mention with scorn and treat with disdain: “straight cis white males,” adherents of traditional religions, conservatives, moderates, opponents of abortion, and even insufficiently radical liberals and progressives.

You might think those who preach against othering would strive to assure the world of their hospitable intentions: “Just because you have other ideas doesn’t mean I’m going to other you.” Instead, they reliably do the opposite, responding to even mild dissent with anger and ostracism.

True, few professors threaten their students in writing. Yet for every educator who others unbelievers on the record, there are probably dozens – if not hundreds – who do so informally. Imagine you were a student of the chastised Iowa State professor. After she grudgingly affirms your First Amendment rights, would you feel comfortable submitting work she previously stated was grounds for dismissal? Not likely, because her initial statement so stridently othered you.

The moral: The crucial variable is not the official class policy, but the attitude of the teacher. And teachers who *think* what the Iowa State professor *wrote* abound.

As far as I know, intolerant, thin-skinned, anti-intellectual educators have been around for... well, forever. What has changed is the Orwellian nature of their reaction to dissent. Traditional authoritarians othered openly. Orwellian proponents of “diversity and inclusion” other vast swaths of humanity while giving the evil eye to anyone who doubts their supreme commitment to compassion and acceptance.

September 29, 2020

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Uniformity and Exclusion Movement.” *EconLog*, August 5, 2020.

2. Custodio, Jessica. “Prof Threatens to Punish Students for Pro-Life, Anti-BLM Views.” *Leadership Institute Campus Reform*, August, 2020.

Loyalty Oaths Compared: An Orwellian Exercise

A key tenet of America's civic religion is that the McCarthy-era persecution of Communists and Communist sympathizers was both paranoid and immoral. Academics are especially strident in their commitment to this tenet. And since they are academics, they're especially dismayed by *academia's* persecution of Communists and Communist sympathizers. The most infamous form of this persecution: the loyalty oaths many universities imposed on their employees. Sign the oath, or lose your job.

What exactly did these loyalty oaths say? Here's UC Berkeley's Loyalty Oath of 1950.

Constitutional Oath (Constitution of the State of California, Article 20, Section 3)

"I do solemnly swear (or affirm, as the case may be) that I will support the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the State of California, and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of my office according to the best of my ability."

As passed by the Regents, April 12, 1950.

“Having taken the constitutional oath of the office required by the State of California, I hereby formally acknowledge my acceptance of the position and salary named, and also state that I am not a member of the Communist Party or any other organization which advocates the overthrow of the Government by force or violence, and that I have no commitments in conflict with my responsibilities with respect to impartial scholarship and free pursuit of truth. I understand that the foregoing statement is a condition of my employment and a consideration of payment of my salary.”¹

Notice the mild wording of this Loyalty Oath. A person who *personally* advocates the violent overthrow of the government could truthfully sign it as long as he belongs to no *organization* that shares his position. A philosophical communist in full sympathy with Stalin could truthfully sign it as long as he is *personally* an “impartial scholar” in “free pursuit of truth.” Needless to say, every species of democratic socialist could readily sign, as could every kind of anti-anti-Communist.

By way of contrast, let’s compare UC Berkeley’s new Diversity and Inclusion Oath. Well, it’s actually much more. An Oath merely requires you to parrot someone else’s words; what Berkeley now mandates is a self-authored Diversity and Inclusion Vow in order to determine eligibility for employment. The university then scores your Vow for orthodoxy.² Part 1 of its rubric, “Knowledge About Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” assigns you a prohibitively low score if your statement contains stuff like:

Little expressed knowledge of, or experience with, dimensions of diversity that result from different identities. Defines diversity only in terms of different areas of study or different nationalities, but doesn't discuss gender or ethnicity/race. Discusses diversity in vague terms, such as "diversity is important for science." May state having had little experience with these issues because of lack of exposure, but then not provide any evidence of having informed themselves. Or may discount the importance of diversity.

That's right, merely "discounting the importance of diversity" virtually bars you from faculty employment. Imagine if the 1950 Oath required you to, "Affirm the great importance of the fight against Communism." Or sanctioned those who merely "discussed anti-Communism in vague terms."

The rubric continues:

Seems not to be aware of, or understand the personal challenges that underrepresented individuals face in academia, or feel any personal responsibility for helping to eliminate barriers. For example, may state that it's better not to have outreach or affinity groups aimed at underrepresented individuals because it keeps them separate from everyone else, or will make them feel less valued.

This would be akin to a 1950 Oath that mandated support for current anti-Communist *tactics*. Something like: "For example, may state that it's better not to support right-wing dictatorships because it creates the false impression that capitalism and democracy are incompatible."

What's afoot? Orwellian doublethink of the highest order. Sure, the hated 1950 Loyalty Oath *seems* far less onerous than the new Diversity and

Inclusion Vow. But the people who refused to sign the 1950 Oath were heroes standing up for freedom of conscience. The people who question today's orthodoxy, in contrast, are hate-mongers who need to be excluded from high-skilled employment.

Newspeak-to-English translation: Full-blown Stalinism is no big deal, a mere difference of opinion. Yet even tepid doubts about whether mandatory discrimination against high-performing groups has already gone far enough are anathema, anathema, anathema.

September 14, 2020

Notes

1. UC History Digital Archives. “The University Loyalty Oath: A 50th Anniversary Perspective Symposium.” *University of California History Project*.
2. “Rubric for Assessing Candidate Contributions to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging.” *UC Berkeley Office for Faculty Equity and Welfare*.

Good Manners vs. Political Correctness

My first face-to-face encounter with political correctness came in 1989. All undergrads in my dorm at UC Berkeley were strongly urged to attend the all-important DARE meeting. Not DARE as in “Drug Abuse Resistance Education” but DARE as in “Diversity Awareness through Resources and Education.” I had disdain for this simple-minded leftist propaganda then, and the recent return of political correctness seems even worse.

These days, however, I’m also often appalled by the opponents of political correctness. I’m appalled by their innumeracy. In a vast world, daily “newsworthy” outrages show next to nothing about the severity of a problem.¹ I’m appalled by their self-pity. Political correctness is annoying, but the world is packed with far more serious ills. Most of all, though, I’m appalled by their antinomianism, better known as “trolling.” Loudly saying disgusting things you probably don’t even believe in order to enrage “Social Justice Warriors” further impedes the search for truth – and makes your targets look decent by comparison.

Against both political correctness and the trolling it inspires, I propose an old-fashioned remedy: good manners. Everyone should feel comfortable speaking their minds – as long as they’re polite. In slogan form: It’s not what you say; it’s how you say it.

Every child knows the basics of politeness. Talk nicely. Don't yell. Don't call names. Listen and respond to what people literally say. Don't personally insult people. Don't take generalizations personally. If someone's meaning is unclear, don't put words in his mouth; ask him to clarify. And of course, don't escalate. If someone's impolite, the polite response is to end the conversation, not respond in kind.

Isn't this just "tone policing"? Sure. People can and should comport themselves like ladies and gentlemen. You can fairly criticize Social Justice Warriors for *one-sided* tone policing – their failure to police their own tone. And you can fairly criticize them for acting as if there's no polite way to reject their views. But proper tone policing is what makes conversation productive and pleasant. (And of course, the more pleasant conversation is, the more we're likely to constructively converse).

Aren't some positions *inherently* impolite? Maybe, but they're so rare we needn't worry about them. If someone says, "Your whole family should be murdered," they *almost* always say so impolitely.² To put it mildly. But there are clear exceptions. It's not impolite to simply be a utilitarian, and in the right kind of trolley problem, utilitarianism implies murderous answers. While I'm not a Peter Singer fan, he seems polite to me.

But isn't trolling fun? For some people, it obviously is.⁴ But trolling is still very bad.⁵ If someone trolls you, you should just politely end the conversation and find someone worth talking to.

March 23, 2017

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Case Against News.” *EconLog*, March 5, 2011.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “The Meaning of Mood.” *EconLog*, December 11, 2015.
3. Kavanagh, Peter. “Are Peter Singer’s Ideas Too Dangerous to Hear?” *The Star*, September 13, 2015.
4. Caplan, Bryan. “The Psychology of Trolling.” *EconLog*, January 2, 2015.
5. Caplan, Bryan. “Against Trolling.” *EconLog*, April 20, 2016.

Right-Wing Grievance Studies

The team behind the Sokal 2.0 hoax self-consciously targeted what they call “grievance studies.”¹ What ties all their targets together? My preferred answer is that grievance studies embrace both *antipathy* and *self-pity*. Or to be more precise, each of these fields intellectually justifies:

- (a) Antipathy for a large, unselective group.²
- (b) Encouragement of self-pity for the alleged victims of the aforementioned large, unselective group.

Feminism, for example, normally combines antipathy for men with the encouragement of self-pity for women.³ Ethnic studies normally combines antipathy for whites with the encouragement of self-pity for the relevant ethnicity. Sexuality studies normally combines antipathy for cis-gendered heterosexuals with the encouragement of self-pity for everyone else. While I don’t claim that every person working in these areas embraces antipathy and self-pity, these fields would be unrecognizable without their antipathy and self-pity.

I realize that this is an unflattering portrait, but please don’t caricature my position. I’m *not* saying that grievance studies are about groups “hating their oppressors and feeling sorry for themselves.” “Antipathy” is milder than hate, and you don’t have to belong to group X to encourage its members to feel self-pity. Indeed, there’s no reason why a fan of grievance

studies couldn't accept my characterization, then add, "In this case, antipathy and self-pity are justified."⁴

But what if, like me, you deplore all theories of collective guilt?⁵ You could just condemn the standard examples of "grievance studies" and move on.* But the judicious move is to see whether the standard list is complete. All of Sokal 2.0's targets were decidedly left-wing. Do grievance studies have any right-wing analogues?

If you limit your domain to academia, maybe not. Given left-wing dominance in higher education, that's hardly surprising.⁶ But you only have to mildly expand the search grid to find thriving examples of right-wing grievance studies.

First and foremost, there is "right-wing populism" also known as "nativism" or just "anti-immigration movements." While I don't think it's fair to say that the typical member of these groups hates foreigners, their *antipathy* is obvious – and so is their eagerness to make native-born Americans feel sorry for themselves. Look, for example, at the Center for Immigration Studies website. What will you see, day in, day out? First, constant negativity toward the foreign-born, a tireless and one-sided effort to enumerate complaints.⁷ Second, promotion of self-pity for native-born Americans: "Oh, these poor abused people, when will the globalist politicians finally hear their pleas?" (If you want to see an even more extreme version of nativist grievance studies, check out *The Social Contract Press*).

The same goes for the numerous conservatives eager to escalate the "clash of civilizations" between the West and Islam. Though it seems unfair to accuse them of outright "hatred" for Muslims, it also seems blind to deny their antipathy. Whenever I privately discuss Islam with them, their distaste

for Muslims is obvious. And so is their gospel of self-pity: “We have the military strength to settle this clash of civilizations once and for all, but lack the moral courage to defend ourselves. Our weakness will be our undoing.” (Needless to say, the Muslim world is also saturated with its own versions of grievance studies).

Isn’t there any important difference between left- and right-wing grievance studies? The fundamental question, too big to address here, is the extent to which each grievance study’s antipathy and self-pity are justified. The more visible difference, though, is that left-wing grievance studies are too drenched in obscure academic jargon to reach the common man.⁸ Right-wing grievance studies, in contrast, attempt to speak to the masses in their own language, which sharply increases the probability that politicians will eventually make their brand of antipathy and self-pity the law of the land.

* The Sokal-2.0 team states that their papers “span at least fifteen subdomains of thought in grievance studies, including (feminist) gender studies, masculinities studies, queer studies, sexuality studies, psychoanalysis, critical race theory, critical whiteness theory, fat studies, sociology, and educational philosophy.” To my mind, sociology – an extremely diverse field – clearly does *not* belong on this list; and no sociology journals were successfully hoaxed.⁹ I’m also puzzled by the inclusion of “educational philosophy.”

October 9, 2018

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Sokal 2.0 as Ideological Turing Test.” *EconLog*, October 4, 2018.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “The Identity of Shame.” *EconLog*, October 30, 2014.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “Against Argumentative Definitions.” *EconLog*, February 20, 2018.
4. Walters, Suzanna. “Why Can’t We Hate Men?” *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2018.
5. Caplan, Bryan. “Collective Guilt: A Socratic Dialogue.” *EconLog*, February 12, 2013.
6. Caplan, Bryan. “The Ivory Tower: Do Non-Leftists Want In?” *EconLog*, January 28, 2010.
7. Caplan, Bryan. “‘Low-Immigration, Pro-Immigrant’ versus the Law of Return.” *EconLog*, February 23, 2013.
8. Caplan, Bryan. “Postmodernism: Private Vice, Public Virtue?” *EconLog*, March 17, 2005.
9. Mounk, Yascha. “What an Audacious Hoax Reveals About Academia.” *The Atlantic*, October 10, 2018.

Don't Pickpocket Your Students

Imagine you're a professor somewhere. You hear rumors of the creation of a new Office of Student Property Security. "Whatever," you think.

Yet before long, you're summoned to a brand-new mandatory training session run by certified officers of Student Property Security. At this session (in-person back in the old days; now Zoom of course), they give you a tortoise-paced 90-minute Powerpoint presentation on the student property crisis and the appropriate faculty response. And the whole spiel can be readily summarized in a single commandment: "*Don't pickpocket your students.*"

To me, such a training session would be insulting, pointless, and unhinged.

Why insulting? Because I would never consider pickpocketing my students in a million years. I don't need a self-styled anti-pickpocketing "expert" to remind me of this elementary obligation. To quote Uncle Junior in *The Sopranos*, "Where does he get the effrontery?"

Why pointless? Because any professor who *did* pickpocket his students would probably not be dissuaded by a training seminar. Wrong-doers already know the rules; they just don't care.

Why unhinged? Because there is no ongoing pickpocketing "crisis." Sure, the media can pinpoint a few egregious scandals in a country with

over 300 million inhabitants. But no matter how much outrage such scandals spark, they show next to nothing about statistical reality. And outrage directed at those who demand hard numbers – not horrifying anecdotes – shows *less* than nothing about real life.¹

What would motivate an institution to impose this insulting, pointless, and unhinged training? It could be an effort to diminish the school's legal liability; if a pickpocketed student ever sues the school, the school can protest, “Don’t blame us, we run a first-rate anti-pickpocketing training program!” But it’s hard to imagine that a jury would find such protests convincing. The real motive, I suspect, is not that the administration is protecting their school from lawsuits, but that administrators are protecting *themselves* from hassling. Once the student pickpocketing availability cascade gets off the ground, the administrator who refuses to “do something” to “address the crisis” troubleth his own house and inherits the wind.²

Now to be fair, no American university currently requires faculty to attend mandatory anti-pickpocketing training.

As far as I know.

And that’s great because it would be truly Kafkaesque if any university did.

October 20, 2020

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “You Will Not Stampede Me.” *EconLog*, August 17, 2020.

2. Kuran, Timur, and Cass Sunstein. “Availability Cascades and Risk Regulation.” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 51, no. 4 (1999) pp. 683–768.

The Wrong Pieces on the Chessboard

Inspired by a few recent posts, several friends have asked me if I've finally "woken up" to the great political threat of wokism.¹ In particular, they're hoping that I'm ready to at least back the American right as the clear lesser of two evils.

I fear my response is: It's complicated.

From a global point of view, I continue to see the American left and right as moral approximates.² No doubt one is even worse than the other, but they're both so vicious that I see little reason to precisely weigh their sins.³ While I disagree with the left on a larger number of issues, the American right is not merely wrong but sadistic on the single most important policy issue on Earth: immigration. If your idea of freedom is gleefully denying the vast majority of humanity the right to live and work where they please, I am not on your side. No way, no how, nothing doing.

From a personal point of view, however, the American left has become quite bad for me. Why? Because as a university professor, the left surrounds me. As my colleague Dan Klein has conclusively documented, academia isn't merely overwhelmingly leftist; outposts of dissent from left-wing orthodoxy are rapidly vanishing.⁴ (And don't believe the nonsense that the median academic is "moderate." A Bernie Sanders supporter could easily

fancy himself a “moderate” when a quarter of his colleagues are self-identified “Marxists.”)

Even tenure at a public university no longer fully insulates me and my friends from thinly-veiled indoctrination and censorship. I worry that in a decade or two there will be virtually no new positions left in academia for my students, friends, and family.

Would the Right do the same if they had the chance? Plausibly, though the Right has done precious little to defund higher education to cut their foes in academia down to size. The key left-right difference, though, is this: Unlike the left, the right doesn’t have the right pieces on the chessboard to harm me personally. I could go out of my way to antagonize and insult the right, free of fear, because with few exceptions, they’re not my administrators, not my colleagues, not my students, and not my customers. In contrast, when I write about the Orwellian left, friends privately warn me to shut up. And these friends have a point: Tenure doesn’t enforce itself.

How worried am I that my tenure will be revoked for political reasons – or any reasons? I’d still assign it no more than 2% for my career. Yet I’d assign a 40% chance that GMU will severely mistreat me for dissent before I die.

I say “die,” not “retire,” because thanks to tenure, I’m on the academic chessboard for life.

October 19, 2020

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Implicit and Structural Witchery.” *EconLog*, September 9, 2020; Caplan, Bryan. “The Uniformity and Exclusion Movement.” *EconLog*, August 5, 2020; Caplan, Bryan. “Orwellian Othering.” *EconLog*, September 29, 2020; Caplan, Bryan. “Loyalty Oaths Compared: An Orwellian Exercise.” *EconLog*, September 14, 2020.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Moral Approximates.” *EconLog*, February 19, 2020.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “Apolitical Reasons to Hate Politics.” *EconLog*, September 27, 2016.
4. Langbert, Mitchell, Anthony Quain, and Daniel Klein. “Faculty Voter Registration in Economics, History, Journalism, Law, and Psychology.” *Econ Journal Watch* 13.3 (2016).
5. Caplan, Bryan. “The Prevalence of Marxism in Academia.” *EconLog*, March 31, 2015.

Does Identity Politics Pay?

When I scoff at group identity, critics often call me naive. Won't anyone who heeds my advice to eschew identity politics end up being victimized by all the folks who *do* take their group identities with utmost seriousness? Then rational self-interest requires identity politics in self-defense.

The rational self-interest version of this story is trivial to refute. In modern, anonymous societies like our own, *all* forms of political action are, selfishly speaking, a complete waste of time. This is basic Mancur Olson. You're one person out of billions. Selling your soul to identity politics is astronomically unlikely to noticeably change public policy.

Fortunately, there's a smarter version of the same story. Sure, identity politics is individually fruitless. But won't *groups* that embrace identity politics fare better than groups that don't?

Maybe. But there are three big reasons to doubt it.

First, there's opportunity cost. The time that members of your group devote to politics is time those members *aren't* devoting to personal advancement. As Thomas Sowell pointedly observes:

Groups that rose from poverty to prosperity seldom did so by having racial or ethnic leaders. While most Americans can easily name a

number of black leaders, current or past, how many can name Asian American ethnic leaders or Jewish ethnic leaders?²

Second, ramping up your side's identity politics often has the perverse side effect of inspiring rival groups' identity politics. Making your group angry and scary can yield lots of goodies *if no other group reacts*. But the angrier and scarier your group gets, the more likely other groups are to respond in kind. Net effect? Unclear, as usual.³ And if you instantly exclaim, "So we need to get really angry and scary to make our rival groups back down!" you've utterly missed the point.

Third, activists' beliefs about the effects of public policies are often deeply confused. So even if identity politics gives your group total power, the results could easily be disastrous for your group. See the sad history of decolonization.

None of this proves that identity politics never pays. My point, rather, is that identity politics is unreliable at best. When you put your childish identity aside, you aren't just sparing yourself; you could easily be doing your former compatriots a favor, too. As far as anyone knows, nobility is a free lunch.⁴

October 31, 2014

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. "The Identity of Shame." *EconLog*, October 30, 2014.
2. Sowell, Thomas. "Who Is Racist?" *Townhall*, July 9, 2013.
3. Caplan, Bryan. "Why Most Economists Are Hawks and Why They Might Be Wrong." *EconLog*, April 27, 2005.

4. Caplan, Bryan. “Against Human Weakness.” *EconLog*, September 2, 2009.

Including the Renegade

In the last six months, I've found myself stuck in two separate Sermons on Inclusion. These were public events. Neither was branded as left-wing. Both, however, gave the floor to speakers who explained the supreme value of making everyone feel included in the community.

In each case, my mid-sermon reaction was the same: "I don't think I've ever before felt so *excluded* in all my life."

Why would I react so negatively? It's not because I disagree with the one-sentence summary of the sermons. Sure, be friendly to people. Make them feel welcome. It's common decency. So what's the problem?

I'm tempted to blame the glaring hypocrisy. It was obvious that the speakers had zero interest in making Republicans, conservatives, macho males, traditional Christians, veterans, or economists feel included. In fact, the Sermons on Inclusion were full of thinly-veiled accusations against members of these groups.

Yet on reflection, glaring hypocrisy is too ubiquitous in life to explain why I personally felt so excluded by the Sermons on Inclusion.

The real reason I felt so excluded was that the preachers of both Sermons on Inclusion spoke as if human beings naturally value their cultural heritage. Frankly, I usually don't. I don't value my religious heritage. My mother was Catholic, and I was raised Catholic. But I deem

the religion false and don't care about it. I don't value my ethnic heritage. My mother was Irish, and my father was Jewish, but neither identity matters to me. I don't support Ireland or Israel... or any other country for that matter. My parents raised me to be an American nationalist; my schools taught me about the wonders of democracy. But in all honesty, the only institution I really believe in is business.¹

So what am I? A renegade. And I'm not alone. Lots of people turn their backs on the religion of their birth. Lots of people never feel – or lose interest in – their ethnic heritage. Lots of people dissent from “their” political culture. Cultural loyalists may call them traitors, sell-outs, self-haters, or *gusanos*.² Yet despite our cosmic diversity, we renegades have one thing in common: We refuse to be ruled by the circumstances of our birth. And any sincere Sermon on Inclusion ought to acknowledge our existence and outlook.

Unfortunately, this omission is hard to correct, because one of the main goals of Sermons on Inclusion is to foster group pride... and the existence of renegades is an affront to group pride. You can't favorably discuss the assimilated Irish without tacitly snubbing people who cherish their Irish identity. You can't praise people who leave Orthodox Judaism without tacitly snubbing Orthodox Jews. Et cetera.

But don't Sermons on Inclusion lionize *some* renegades, like anti-war veterans or the transgendered? Sure. But since the Sermons barely acknowledge the existence of these renegades' groups of origin, there's little tension. It's easy to welcome renegades from group X if your default is to exclude typical members of group X.

Are efforts to promote inclusion therefore self-defeating? Not if you're careful, because actions speak louder than words. As I've argued before, the

best way to make people feel included is just to be friendly and welcoming. Sermons divide us. Common decency brings us together.³

February 18, 2019

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Pro-Market AND Pro-Business.” *EconLog*, August 2, 2018.
2. “Who Are Those ‘Gusanos’ Who Celebrated Fidel’s Death?” *News | TeleSUR English*, December 6, 2016.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “The Divisiveness of Cohesion.” *EconLog*, November 4, 2016.

Touchy-Feely Bull in a China Shop

I'm delighted to report that – after experimenting with conventional high school – my elder sons have resumed homeschooling.¹ Their complaints were numerous, but our whole family was taken aback by their school's disinterest in academics. Math aside, every class was infused by a pedagogical philosophy I can only describe as "touchy-feely." This philosophy was so pervasive that teachers seemed unaware of the possibility that other views even exist.

On the surface, admittedly, touchy-feely pedagogy seems unobjectionable. The teachers warmly express their affection for the students. They believe in treating students like human beings – and making learning fun. Most seem quite sincere: They're convinced that their methods are great for everyone. Alas, they're mistaken. Our chief objections:

1. Some subjects simply don't lend themselves to a touchy-feely approach. Math is the obvious example; you can't teach math by asking kids "How do the numbers make you feel?" But the same goes for writing. If you want to improve students' writing, you *must* make liberal use of your red pen.
2. The touchy-feely approach crowds out measurable learning. Teachers in virtually every one of my kids' classes (none of which had "Art" in the

title) assigned art projects – posters, name tags, flags, and so on. The voluminous time the students spent on these projects could have been focused on techniques that actually yield knowledge: reading the textbook, solving problems, writing essays, and taking tests.

3. Some students clearly enjoy the touchy-feely approach. But plenty of others resent it. A few – like my kids – find it humiliating. So contrary to the party line, touchy-feely is *not* “Better for everyone.”

4. The party line is especially galling because the practitioners of touchy-feely pedagogy don’t settle for passive obedience. In a traditional academic program, students are expected to complete their work, but no one says they have to enjoy it. In a touchy-feely program, in contrast, teachers keep insisting, “This is fun!” and “Students *love* doing this!” And every student’s supposed to play along.

5. I didn’t bother sharing my concerns with my sons’ teachers because I deemed it fruitless. But if I had vented, I bet they would have replied thusly: “But *all* the kids *I* talk to love my approach.” Plausibly true, but deeply misleading, due to two powerful psychological forces: Social Desirability Bias and confirmation bias. Long story short: students keep negative opinions to themselves, and teachers misinterpret mixed evidence in their own favor. Just like humans generally.

I don’t expect the world to revolve around me or my kids – and lashing out at touchy-feely people is hard because they’re so nice. Still, as we economists emphasize, nice people often do bad things. Good intentions are not enough; if you really want to do good, you have to calmly weigh the actual consequences of your actions. You may find drawing posters more fun than reading textbooks, but that’s a reflection of your personality type, not a universal law of human nature. Forget these truisms, and you risk

being a touchy-feely bull in a china shop – loudly expressing philanthropic sentiments as you trample all over the feelings of hapless studious children.

November 1, 2017

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Caplan Family School Graduation Podcast.” *EconLog*, September 5, 2017; Caplan, Bryan. “My Homeschooling Textbooks.” *EconLog*, August 30, 2017.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “The Power of Distributed Practice.” *EconLog*, September 21, 2015.

Colonialism and Anti-Colonialism: Blame Nationalism for Both

Some historians argue that colonialism was an outgrowth of nationalism. Once the people in the leading industrial powers started to strongly identify as British, French, German, American, or Japanese, they fell in love with the idea of planting their national flags all over the map. Hence, “empire.”

Other historians argue that *anti-colonialism* was an outgrowth of nationalism. Once people in Asia and Africa started to strongly identify as Indian, Malaysian, Egyptian, Algerian, or Angolan, they fell in love with the idea of replacing the foreign flags on the map with their own. Hence, “national liberation.”

A thinly-veiled political agenda usually stands behind these claims. Most people nowadays agree that colonialism was bad. So if nationalism leads to colonialism, that’s a mark against nationalism; but if nationalism leads to anti-colonialism, that’s a mark in favor of nationalism. Lingering fans of colonialism naturally reverse these scoring rules.

So who’s right about the connection between nationalism and colonialism? As far as I can tell, *both* sides are right. Nationalism inspired many of the world’s mightiest countries to attack and annex the world’s economic laggards. But this in turn exposed the inhabitants of the colonies

to the idea of nationalism. Before long, native thinkers were marketing their locally-made variants – and calling for national liberation. Once the colonial powers lost the stomach for draconian repression, the anti-colonial movement swiftly triumphed.

If nationalism inspired two incompatible movements, how should we evaluate it? You might just call it a wash: Nationalism giveth, and nationalism taketh away. But this shoulder shrug overlooks two mountains of bodies. The first mountain: All the people killed to establish colonial rule. The second mountain: All the people killed to overthrow colonial rule. It is perfectly fair to blame nationalism for *both* “transition costs.”

Surprising implication: *Regardless* of the relative merits of colonial versus indigenous rule, the history of colonialism makes nationalism look very bad indeed. Why? Because colonial rule didn’t last! So if you’re pro-colonial, nationalism led to a high transition cost, followed by ephemeral wonders, followed by another high transition cost. And if you’re anti-colonial, nationalism led to a high transition cost, followed by ephemeral horrors, followed by another high transition cost. Two dreadful deals, however you slice it.

But don’t you either have to be pro-colonial or anti-colonial? No. You can take the cynical view that foreign and native rule are about equally bad. You can take the pacifist view that the difference between foreign and native rule isn’t worth a war.¹ Or, like me, you can merge these positions into cynical pacifism. On this view, fighting wars to start colonial rule was one monstrous crime – and fighting wars to end colonial rule was another. Nationalism is intellectually guilty on both counts because it is nationalism that convinced people around the world that squares of multi-colored cloth are worth killing for.²

January 21, 2014

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Common-Sense Case for Pacifism.” *EconLog*, April 5, 2010.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Patriotism as Political Correctness.” *EconLog*, December 29, 2010.

II

Being Beckerian

The Missing Right-Wing Firms: A Beckerian Puzzle

I teach the economics of discrimination every chance I get. Why? Because the analytical framework, launched by the great Gary Becker in 1957, mightily illuminates so many questions that we care so much about.¹ When you see that almost all garbage collectors are male, for example, what should you conclude? Perhaps women and men are equally able and interested in collecting garbage, but employers in the industry dislike women. Perhaps male garbage collectors don't like working alongside women. Or perhaps customers don't want women to touch their trashcans. Alternately, perhaps men are better at collecting garbage than women. (Statistically!) Or maybe women dislike this line of work more than men. (Again, statistically!)

One of these stories might be the whole truth; all five could have some merit; or anything in between. The analytical framework can't tell you the breakdown; you need empirics (and good judgment) for that. Yet without Becker's analytical framework, empirical researchers wouldn't even know where to start.

One of the main insights of this Beckerian framework is that *discrimination creates profit opportunities*. That includes employer-on-worker discrimination, worker-on-worker discrimination, and consumer-on-

worker discrimination. If most employers dislike workers in group X, depressing their wages below their productivity, employers who feel differently can profit by hiring them. If most workers dislike workers in group X, similarly, employers can profit by giving the disliked workers “a firm of their own.” If most consumers dislike workers in group X, employers can profit by keeping disfavored workers out of the public eye. This doesn’t mean that market forces transform bigots into models of tolerance, though perhaps they do that too. What the Beckerian framework implies, rather, is that market forces help *neutralize bigotry’s effects*. With the right incentives and strategies, intolerance can be both prevalent and impotent.

Most research on the economics of discrimination focuses on race and gender, but Becker’s framework works equally well for *political* bigotry. Which raises a series of awkward questions for anyone troubled by the rise of corporate-sponsored “social justice” in general, and “cancel culture” in particular.² In the current office climate, even many life-long left-wingers fear the career consequences of publicizing their doubts about evolving left-wing orthodoxy. They’re afraid to share their views with co-workers and afraid to express themselves on social media because their co-workers might find out. Moderates and right-wingers feel an even stronger need to keep their political views to themselves. Cutting-edge leftists, in contrast, now feel empowered. When they speak out on the job, employers seem attentive and responsive.

This is not what the economics of discrimination would make you expect. After all, the labor market is *full* of right-wing workers. If left-wing employers don’t want to hire them, you would expect both pragmatic and right-wing employers to pick up the slack. If left-wing workers don’t want

to toil alongside right-wing workers, similarly, you would expect both pragmatic and right-wing employers to tacitly create politically segregated workplaces. If left-wing consumers don't want to buy products from right-wing firms, finally, you would expect both pragmatic and right-wing employers to keep politically disfavored workers out of the public eye.

In the real world, however, it seems *very* hard to find businesses that warmly cater to moderate and right-wing workers. Sure, you can work for a right-wing think tank, a conservative church, Fox News, or Republican-allied lobbyists. And I just visited a decidedly right-wing gift shop in Smokehole, West Virginia; it really stood out! Yet all such establishments sum to a tiny sliver of GDP.

I understand, of course, why few businesses warmly cater to libertarians, or theocrats, or monarchists. There aren't enough monarchist barbers to economically justify a monarchist barbershop. Where, though, are the firms where Republicans don't look over their shoulders before they say they're pro-life? Where are the firms where moderates don't look over their shoulders before they declare that affirmative action has already gone far enough? Where are the firms where males don't look over their shoulders before they express solidarity with the latest target of #MeToo? Billions of 360-degree glances look like a massive profit opportunity. Why then are so few businesses trying to capitalize on said opportunity?

Let's name and ponder the leading explanations.

Explanation #1. My summary of the political climate of American business could be flatly wrong.

Tentative evaluation: I doubt it, but I freely admit that my data is poor.

Explanation #2. Perhaps I'm missing geographic variance. Maybe leftists bully the right in firms in the Northeast Corridor and California,

while rightists bully the left in firms in the South and Texas.

Tentative evaluation: There is probably some truth here. There must be plenty of firms in the South and Texas with minimal left-wing propaganda. Still, are there really many where the Human Resources Division hails meritocracy and condemns hypersensitivity?

Explanation #3. Perhaps I'm missing occupational and/or industry-based variance. Leftists rule academia, and dominate law and tech. But the right rules a bunch of other prominent occupations and industries.

Tentative evaluation: I struggle to convincingly name more than a handful of such occupations and industries. In the past, you might say "doctors." Yet these days younger doctors seem like typical left-wing elites. Engineers, similarly, seem more politically apathetic than right-wing.

Explanation #4. Few moderates or right-wingers *care* enough to create a major profit opportunity. While they don't relish looking over their shoulders, they prefer their current job to an alternative where they can shoot their mouths off but earn \$1000 less per year. In this story, the left proverbially just "wants it more." And as usual, the market takes the intensity of conflicting preferences into account.

Tentative evaluation: Very plausible, especially considering how strong the age-ideology correlation has become. When today's conservatives encounter politics on the job, they don't start polishing their resume to find a more politically hospitable home. They tell themselves, "I'm too old for this @%!&!" and get back to work.

Note: A slight variant is that left-wing consumers are more willing to boycott firms they dislike than right-wing consumers. The media's liberal bias could easily amplify this: The left is more likely to hear about corporate policies they find objectionable than the right. (Though this in

turn raises the question, “Why does a highly competitive media market lead to such pronounced left-wing bias?”)

Explanation #5. Discrimination law covertly stymies the creation of right-wing firms. Most obviously, any firm that openly and aggressively opposed #MeToo and #BLM would soon be sued into oblivion.

Tentative evaluation: Even more plausible. Imagine what would happen if a firm’s top brass loudly declared that, “Discrimination simply isn’t a problem here” – and routinely fired complainers for contradicting the party line. Picture a firm blanketed in propaganda telling workers to “Be color-blind,” “Laugh it off,” and “No one likes a tattle-tale.” A small business in a conservative area might get away with this for a few years, but a Fortune 500 company that stuck to its right-wing guns would go down in flames. This does not prevent firms from promoting a *mildly* right-wing corporate culture, but you won’t attract many politically homeless workers with such marginal improvements.

What’s the real story? Any possibilities that I’ve missed? I especially prize answers based on first-hand work experience outside of academia...

September 22, 2020

Notes

1. Becker, Gary. *The Economics of Discrimination*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “The Uniformity and Exclusion Movement.” *EconLog*, August 5, 2020.

Tabarrok Should Bask in His Victimhood

A new study finds that academia discriminates against right-wingers.¹ Alex Tabarrok wishes it were true, but isn't buying it:

I must admit that for a moment I enjoyed basking in my own victimhood. My failings are not my own but are due to discrimination! Ahhh, that feels good. Much as I would like to lay my failings at the feet of the system, however, I cannot do so... I... reject these studies out of intellectual consistency.

Alex doubts that markets discriminate against women. Why? Basic economics predicts that in a competitive market, firms that don't hire on the basis of merit don't last. Advanced econometrics tells us that controlling for differences in workers' quality makes apparent discrimination shrink substantially or vanish. If he is theoretically and empirically suspicious about the reality of discrimination against women, asks Alex, how can he give discrimination against conservatives any more credence?

The main problem with Alex's analysis: The economics of discrimination assumes that firms maximize profits, and can't produce at more than the minimum average cost forever. Neither assumption holds for universities. Universities are non-profits. If chairmen or administrators figure out a way to get higher quality professors for lower wages, their pay

does not go up. In fact, their lives probably get harder, because their “cost-cutting” efforts will provoke a bitter backlash on campus.

Ask yourself: Why don’t department chairs fight to replace senile tenured faculty with bright, eager graduate student instructors? First, they pocket essentially none of the savings; second, their lives would become a living hell.

But how can universities produce at higher than minimum average cost forever? In the case of government universities, it’s obvious. They’ve got tax subsidies to keep them afloat. In the case of private universities (and public universities too!), it’s almost as obvious: They’ve got alumni donations to keep them afloat. Either way, in the university industry, it is NOT “sink or swim.”

In theory, then, we should not be surprised if universities discriminate against women, conservatives, or anyone else. The only question is: Who does the hiring, and who do they have a “taste for discrimination” against?

Like Alex, I don’t think universities discriminate against women. But my reason is not that discrimination is a one-way ticket to university bankruptcy. No, my reason is that the people in charge of hiring professors like – indeed, *prefer* – to hire women. Maybe not in math and the hard sciences, but most academics want to assuage their liberal guilt. (And even math and hard sciences face pressure from administrators who want to assuage their liberal guilt). I’ve repeatedly heard academics insist “*We really need to hire a woman!*” Sounds like a taste for discrimination against men to me.

In contrast, people in charge of hiring professors do not like – indeed *prefer not to* – hire conservatives, Republicans, or libertarians. Some hate those bastards; others simply feel uncomfortable around them. Dan Klein’s

findings of overwhelming ideological imbalance in academia speak volumes.² I doubt if the median professor has a single close right-wing friend. Again, this is probably not too important in math and hard sciences, but if research and politics connect, your politics affects whether people want to hire you.

Like Alex, I can't complain about how academia treated me. I'm blessed. But:

1. There is huge selection bias. Alex and I are libertarian professors. You've got to sample over all the right-wingers who wanted to be professors, not just the ones who made it.
2. One reason I chose economics was because I correctly perceived it to have the weakest left-wing bias of any social science or humanity. Otherwise, I might have done philosophy. If economics were as leftist as most social sciences, I might have become a lawyer instead. (Egad!) I can't believe I'm the only potential professor who weighed these factors in his occupational choice.
3. Even if we control for quality of publications, the gatekeepers – journal editors and referees – also feel virtually no financial cost of rejecting articles they find ideologically distasteful. So there is probably more discrimination against right-wingers than the data suggest, not less.
4. If there is no discrimination, how does it happen that Alex and I and half the other staunch libertarian economists in the world are all in the same department? Segregation is the predicted effect of worker-on-worker discrimination. And that's what we see.

April 23, 2005

Notes

1. Rothman, Stanley, Robert Lichter, and Neil Nevitte. “Politics and Professional Advancement Among College Faculty.” *The Forum*, 2005.
2. Klein, Daniel, and Charlotta Stern. “How Politically Diverse are the Social Sciences and Humanities? Survey Evidence from Six Fields.” *Academic Questions*, 2005.

What Is IQ — and Why Does It Matter?

Years ago, I told Tyler Cowen, “It’s surprising that IQ tests predict life outcomes so well because there’s usually no financial incentive to get a high score.” He replied, “People try out of pride – an under-rated motive.” So when Tyler blogged Duckworth et al., “Role of Test Motivation in Intelligence Testing” I naturally took notice.¹ Key claims²:

1. Material incentives boost IQ scores:

In 46 independent samples ($n = 2,008$), the mean effect of material incentives on IQ was medium to large: $g = 0.64$ [95% confidence interval (CI) = 0.39, 0.89], $P < 0.001$.

2. Material incentives have a bigger effect on the IQs of people with low scores:

Because exact baseline IQ scores were not reported in some samples, we created a binary variable where 1 = below average (i.e., $IQ < 100$) and 2 = above average (i.e., $IQ \geq 100$). The effect of incentives was greater for individuals of below-average baseline IQ: $Q_{between}(1) = 9.76$, $P = 0.002$. In 23 samples with IQ scores below the mean, the effect size was large: $g = 0.94$ (95% CI = 0.54, 1.35).

In contrast, in 23 samples of above-average IQ, the effect was small: $g = 0.26$ (95% CI = 0.10, 0.41). A similar analysis in which baseline IQ scores (available for 43 of 46 samples) were treated as a continuous moderator indicated that a 1 SD increase in IQ is associated with about two-thirds of an SD decrease in the effect of incentives: $b = -0.04$, $P < 0.001$.

The authors reasonably infer that IQ is more of a composite intelligence/motivation measure than usually believed – especially by interdisciplinary researchers. Their words to the wise:

Our conclusions may come as no surprise to psychologists who administer intelligence tests themselves (49). Where the problem lies, in our view, is in the interpretation of IQ scores by economists, sociologists, and research psychologists who have not witnessed variation in test motivation firsthand. These social scientists might erringly assume that a low IQ score invariably indicates low intelligence.

It's hard to evaluate a piece like this without re-doing the underlying research, but the presentation is compelling and plausible. My main complaint is statements like this:

[W]e hypothesize that test motivation is a third-variable confound that tends to inflate, rather than erode, the predictive power of IQ scores for later-life outcomes.

This is especially odd given Duckworth et al.’s effort to distinguish unobserved “true intelligence” from IQ. As far as I can tell, the authors do nothing to show that their results make *IQ* less predictive. They don’t even show that IQ is more mutable than earlier studies find; boosting incentives boosts scores while the incentives remain in place, but there’s no reason to think the boost lasts after the test-takers receive their pay. All the researchers require us to reconsider is *the reason* why IQ is so predictive and hard to durably improve.

For example, instead of saying, “IQ tests show that people are poor because they’re less intelligent – and intelligence is hard to durably raise” we should say, “IQ tests show that people are poor because they’re less intelligent and less motivated – and intelligence and motivation are hard to durably raise.” If, like me, you already believed in the Conscientiousness-poverty connection, that’s no surprise.²

In any case, I urge you to read the original article. I’ve been reading IQ research and personality psychology for over a decade, but these results really are news to me. Your thoughts?

Update: In 2022, Scott Alexander pointed out recent research finding much smaller effects of motivation on IQ. See Bayes, Timothy, and Giles Gignac. “Effort Impacts IQ Test Scores in a Minor Way: A Multi-Study Investigation with Healthy Adult Volunteers.” *Intelligence* 92, 2022.

May 6, 2011

Notes

1. Cowen, Tyler. "Motivation and IQ, Incentives Matter." *Marginal Revolution*, April 27, 2011.
2. Duckworth, Angela, et al. "Role of Test Motivation in Intelligence Testing." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2011.
3. Caplan, Bryan. "EconLog Book Club: For a New Liberty, Chapter 8." *EconLog*, March 17, 2009.

Does It Matter If IQ Matters?

Lots of people loathe IQ research. But even people who are open-minded about IQ often puckishly say “So what?” It doesn’t really matter if IQ is the *main* determinant of earnings, or economic growth, or anything else. All that matters is whether the marginal effect of policy on the variables we *can* change is worth its marginal cost. Thus, it doesn’t really matter if IQ matters.

But this response overlooks a basic point. If IQ matters, then analyses that ignore IQ will typically overstate the marginal effect of other variables.

Simple example: If you statistically estimate the effect of schooling on earnings without controlling for IQ, you get a large coefficient. In the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, for example, you’ll find that one more year of school raises earnings by 12.6%. If you control for IQ, however, the coefficient on education plummets to 7.5%.

Does it matter that IQ matters? Of course! An investment in education that looks extremely profitable if you don’t control for IQ could easily be a big waste of money. The reason: If you don’t control for IQ, you are giving education a lot more credit than it deserves. To say “Let’s focus on the things we *can* change” dodges the hard truth: After you adjust for what you can’t change, the things that you can change may give you very little bang for your buck.

Thus, IQ is highly policy-relevant after all. The left-wing ideologues who damn anyone who even thinks the letters “IQ” are actually on to something: IQ research *does* turn out to be a rationale for “right-wing” laissez-faire policies. The more IQ matters, the more likely it becomes that existing government policies are a waste of money – and that you would get a bigger payoff by doing less – or maybe nothing at all.

October 1, 2005

End All Crime the Easy Way

As you may recall, Scott Alexander recently argued that seemingly silly crime prevention policies could have great – and cheap – effects.¹ I say his mechanism, though theoretically sound, is empirically irrelevant.² Along the way, though, Scott helped me see a theoretically sound way to end *all* crime at *near-zero* cost.

Here's my proposed panacea:

Step 1: Credibly announce that all levels of government will *mercilessly* prosecute the *first* crime committed in the nation each day.

Step 2: There is no Step 2.

What makes this crime policy so effective? Simple: Once you adopt it, *no one* wants to commit the first crime of the day. After all, with the resources of an entire nation arrayed against you, you're almost sure to be caught and harshly punished. And if every potential criminal sits around waiting for someone else to commit the first crime of the day, the first crime of the day never happens. This in turn means that the second crime of the day never happens, the third crime of the day never happens, and so on. Welcome to your crime-free nation!

On reflection, of course, it would be better to switch to an even cheaper panacea:

Step 1': Credibly announce that all levels of government will *mercilessly* prosecute the *first* crime committed in the nation each year.

Step 2': There is no Step 2'.

Which quickly leads us to the cheapest panacea of all:

Step 1'': Credibly announce that all levels of government will *mercilessly* prosecute the *next* crime committed in the nation.

Step 2'': There is no Step 2''.

Now I'm the first to admit that this approach wouldn't work in practice, for all the reasons I previously mentioned.² But if you think Scott's magic bullet in the War on Crime is good, mine's bulletproof.

HT: My idea is inspired by this passage in David Friedman's micro textbook:

You are a hero with a broken sword (Conan, Boromir, or your favorite *Dungeons and Dragons* character) being chased by a troop of bad guys (bandits, orcs, ...). Fortunately you are on a horse and they are not. Unfortunately your horse is tired and they will eventually run you down. Fortunately you have a bow. Unfortunately you have only ten arrows. Fortunately, being a hero, you never miss. Unfortunately there are 40 bad guys...

Problem: Use economics to get away.³

David's solution:

The solution is to shoot the bad guy in front. Then shoot the bad guy in front. Then shoot the bad guy in front. Then the bad guys start competing to see who can run slowest.

June 28, 2018

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Unbearable Arbitrariness of Deploring.” *EconLog*, December 6, 2017; Alexander, Scott. “Contra Caplan on Arbitrary Deploring.” *Slate Star Codex*, June 19, 2018.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “The Illusory Arbitrariness of Deploring?” *EconLog*, June 20, 2018.
3. Friedman, David. *Price Theory: An Intermediate Text*, 2020.

What Would Efficient Sexual Harassment Law Look Like?

In a post I otherwise applaud, Alex Tabarrok presents an efficiency defense of sexual harassment law:

What the theory and the empirical results are saying is that people exposed to a higher risk of sexual harassment are paid more, just as people exposed to a higher risk of death are paid more. In the case of risk, however, the firm's owners (shareholders) are paying higher wages but also getting the benefits of risky work. But in the case of sexual harassment the shareholders are paying higher wages but not getting the benefits of sexual harassment. In other words, from the firm's point of view sexual harassment is a bit like employee theft – with the stealing being done by the harassers. (I alluded to this point in my original post and Miles Kimball made it as well.) Thus, shareholders may benefit if the government can reduce sexual harassment at low cost, precisely because they would then be able to pay lower wages without losing productive workers.¹

Knowing Alex, and noting his coy phrasing, I suspect he doesn't actually buy the argument he's presenting. In any case, though, his words are

misguided. If sexual harassment were really analogous to employee theft...

1. Employers – including sole proprietors – would be free to opt out of the law. Employers could substitute their own harassment rules, ignore the issue, or even fire workers who complain about harassment. After all, if the employer *condones* X, there's clearly no need for the government to protect the employer from X.

2. The law would punish the sexual harasser, not his employer – and compensate the employer, not the harasser. Under current law, in contrast, the harasser sues the employer. In Alex's story, that just victimizes the employer all over again.

You could admittedly argue that #2 isn't a big deal. When agents have long-term contractual relations, distributional effects depend on supply and demand elasticities, not the letter of the law.

But #1 is a very big deal indeed. If employers are really the ultimate victims, and government can protect them at low cost, employers won't *want* to opt out. However, virtually everyone, regardless of ideology, realizes that opting out would be widespread.

Why? Because the whole point of sexual harassment law is to make employers punish behavior they'd prefer to simply tolerate. In the absence of sexual harassment law, employers would ask themselves questions like:

1. Which employee would I rather lose – the harasser or the harassee?
2. Who's willing to pay more to get their way – the harassers to harass, or the harassees to not be harassed? Before you answer, remember that one person's "harassment" is another's "free speech."
3. Many workplace romances are mutually desired. A sexual harassment policy makes it harder to start and continue such relationships. How much

value do workers attach to the relationships that sexual harassment policies would eliminate?

This doesn't mean, of course, that employers would *never* punish sexual harassment. What it means, rather, is that – in the absence of sexual harassment laws – employers would take a pragmatic, cost-benefit approach to the problem.

The same goes, by the way, for employee theft today. Sometimes employers turn a blind eye because the “theft” of e.g. office supplies passes a cost-benefit test. And whether employers turn a blind eye often depends on the status of the employee. A manager appropriates a 3-hole punch? No one cares. A janitor does the same? Pink slip. Employers are running a business – not a moral philosophy seminar.

From an efficiency standpoint, this pragmatic cost-benefit approach is ideal. Still, you have a choice. You can reject sexual harassment law on efficiency grounds. Or you can take this conclusion as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the efficiency norm. Either way, Alex's efficiency defense of sexual harassment law doesn't fly.

July 15, 2012

Notes

1. Tabarrok, Alex. “Empirical Evidence, Sexual Harassment, and the Economic Way of Thinking.” *Marginal Revolution*, July 11, 2012.

The Discouraged Suitor

Labor economists occasionally have a crisis of faith. After years of scrutinizing the unemployment rate, they suddenly remember... *discouraged workers*. Who are they? They're people who *want* a job, but aren't officially unemployed because they aren't actively *searching* for work.

This is a serious problem – and a serious flaw with official unemployment rates. True, we should not forget the Prideful Worker Effect – the workers who say they want a job, but refuse to do any job for which they're genuinely qualified.¹ But if you take introspection half as seriously as I do, you can hardly deny that lots of people find job search *extremely* demoralizing.² When your whole ego and sense of self are on the line, one needs Stoic determination to keep looking in the face of multiple rejections. Every parent has seen even the sweetest of children surrender to despair. Does anyone seriously believe that human beings cease to have these emotions by their eighteenth birthday?

Happily, there's a silver lining: If you ever become a discouraged worker, strong social norms rise to your defense. Imagine you fail to find a job. If anyone mocks your failure, virtually everyone will take your side. The same applies if a bystander snarks, “I guess your very best just isn’t good enough, haha.” Until you finally land a job, parents, friends, and total

strangers will share a bounty of comfort, hope, and friendly advice on how to do better.

Yes, you may prefer to brood alone. Social norms, however, insist that discouraged workers *need* to be encouraged even if they don't *want* to be encouraged. If you say, "I can't find a job," you will hear a barrage of questions: "Where have you looked?" "Are you using social media?" "Maybe you're aiming too high?" "Have you asked your friend, Jim?" Or even: "The economy's picking up; have you tried re-applying anywhere?" You'll also enjoy an abundant supply of truisms: "You've got to keep trying," "We all fail, but you can't give up hope," and "There's no harm in asking." A tad annoying, but these questions are the expression of a valuable social norm: Encourage the discouraged.

Once you take the plight of the Discouraged Worker to heart, you might wonder, "Are there any major analogous social ills that I've also overlooked?" The first that comes to my mind is what I call the *Discouraged Suitor*. Lonely people normally search for a mate; they're analogous to the conventional unemployed. Some lonely people, however, are analogous to Discouraged Workers. Such people want to find love, but the dating experience is so depressing they stop trying.

Denying the existence of Discouraged Suitors is as dogmatic as denying the existence of Discouraged Workers. In both cases, people face a challenge of epic proportions: convince an employer to hire you... or convince a stranger to love you. When the stakes are this high, failure is scary. Unsurprisingly, then, we commonly respond to failure with despair: "I'll never find a job" or "I'll never find love." Discouraged Workers silently endure deep feelings of uselessness. Discouraged Suitors silently endure deep feelings of loneliness.

There is however one major difference: Social norms on the treatment of Discouraged Suitors are none-too-supportive. Parents and friends naturally urge the lonely to persist in the pursuit of true love: “There’s someone out there for everyone!” Yet social norms have also long allowed public mockery of the socially awkward and unattractive: “You’re 25 and never had a girlfriend, heh!” In recent years, moreover, norms against sexual harassment have become stricter and vaguer.* Is asking a co-worker out on a date sexual harassment? What about asking twice? Sure, the probability that you will be fired for one vague affront remains low. The typical Discouraged Suitor, however, is already petrified of rejection. When the norm shifts from “Let them down easy” to “Zero tolerance for sexual harassment,” many lonely people choose the safe route of silent sorrow.

Personally, none of this affects me. I met my wife when I was nineteen, and have never dated anyone else. Along the way, though, I have met many silently suffering lonely souls. If Discouraged Workers deserve sympathy, don’t Discouraged Suitors deserve the same? Needless to say, this doesn’t mean that Discouraged Suitors have a right to be loved or even liked. Like everyone else, however, they should be treated with good manners. Indeed, since Discouraged Suitors rarely speak up on their own behalf, should we not make an extra effort to consider their feelings?

* Morrissey, one of my favorite singers, has made multiple inflammatory comments on sexual harassment, but there’s a kernel of truth here: “Anyone who has ever said to someone else, ‘I like you,’ is suddenly being charged with sexual harassment. You have to put these things into the right relations. If I can not tell anyone that I like him, how would they ever know?”

July 22, 2019

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Prideful Worker Effect.” *EconLog*, December 31, 2013.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “The Philosophy of Introspection.” *EconLog*, January 16, 2007.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “Good Manners vs. Political Correctness.” *EconLog*, March 23, 2017.
4. “Morrissey Clarifies Comments on Sexual Harassment.” *Diffuser*, December 11, 2017.

Endogenous Sexism

Suppose men and women are equally praiseworthy in every way. Both genders are equally honest, fair, peaceful, hard-working, fun-loving, and so on. With one key exception, both genders share the same trait preferences: The average man places as much weight on honesty, fairness, and so on as the average woman. The key exception: Everyone's heterosexual. Men are attracted to women, women are attracted to men.

Suppose further that no one's evaluations are gender-biased. Men have no tendency to see women as worse than they really are, and women have no tendency to see men as worse than they really are. People do however tend to get to know more people of the same sex because, say, men hunt together and women gather together.

Claim: Even in this rarefied setting, sexism will endogenously arise. Men will find the men they personally know to be better than the women they personally know. Women will find the women they personally know to be better than the men they personally know. And if people extrapolate from the people they personally know to all humanity, men will think that men are better than women, and women will think that women are better than men.

Hint: Compare the selection filter you apply to potential friends to the selection filter you apply to the romantic partners of your friends.

Please show your work.

July 18, 2014

Endogenous Sexism Explained

Several people in the comments got the point of my endogenous sexism scenario. Namely: Friends pass a stricter selection filter than *spouses* of friends. If you think poorly of someone, you won't be their friend. But if you think poorly of the spouse of your friend, you'll probably put up with your friend's spouse to preserve your relationship with your friend. As long as people tend to make more same-sex friends, then, men's male associates will seem better than their female associates, and female's female associates will seem better than their male associates.

Two lessons:

1. When a man doesn't like his wife's friends, or a woman doesn't like her husband's friends, it's not surprising.
2. By itself, #1 does not imply sexism. But #1 combined with statistical naivete readily leads to sexism.

How strong should we expect this effect to be in the real world? Hard to say, but friendship is strongly segregated by gender. The General Social Survey, for example, asks about the gender of your *best* friend. Same-sex besties outnumber opposite-sex besties by 4:1 for men and 6:1 for women.

P.S. Don't these results imply quite a bit of unrequited best friendship?
Hmm.¹

July 20, 2014

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Futility of Quarreling When There Is No Surplus to Divide.” *EconLog*, February 11, 2014.

Losing Ground, The Bell Curve, and Coming Apart: A Reconciliation

During Arnold's video conference on *Coming Apart*, Brink Lindsey pointed out the curious fact that Charles Murray wrote three different books about poverty, each with a different explanation.^{1*}

Losing Ground says that the welfare state gives the poor perverse incentives.

The Bell Curve says that the poor have low IQ.

Coming Apart says that the poor are increasingly lacking in virtue.

I agree that Charles Murray could have tried harder to integrate the three accounts. And I obviously don't speak for Murray. But in my view, his three books on poverty are complementary. Quick version:

1. *The Bell Curve* emphasizes the most stable difference between the rich and the poor: The poor tend to be less intelligent. Cognitive ability is an important determinant of success in almost any society. Smarter workers are simply more productive, and competing employers reward them accordingly. In the long-run, therefore, people with low intelligence tend to have correspondingly low incomes.

2. But the effects of intelligence go much deeper. People with low IQs are aren't just less productive; they're also more impulsive. Take pregnancy:

The smarter the woman, the more likely that she deliberately decides to have a child and calculates the best time to do it. The less intelligent the woman is, the more likely that she does not think ahead from sex to procreation, does not remember birth control, does not carefully consider when and under what circumstances she should have a child. How intelligent a woman is may interact with her impulsiveness, and hence her ability to exert self-discipline and restraint on her partner in order to avoid pregnancy.

Or crime:

A lack of foresight, which is often associated with low IQ, raises the attractions of the immediate gains from crime and lowers the strength of the deterrents, which come later (if they come at all). To a person of low intelligence, the threats of apprehension and prison may fade to meaninglessness. They are too abstract, too far in the future, too uncertain.

Implicit: One of the best ways to help impulsive people reach decent long-run outcomes is to give them a lot of strong *short-run* feedback.

3. In *Losing Ground*, Murray shows what happens when the welfare state shelters people from this short-run feedback. People with ordinary levels of impulsiveness don't change their behavior very much. Why not? Because the long-run consequences of impulsive behavior remain bad. But highly

impulsive people change their behavior a lot – and end up with bad career and family outcomes:

The most compelling explanation for the marked shift in the fortunes of the poor is that they continued to respond, as they always had, to the world as they found it, but that we – meaning the not-poor and un-disadvantaged – had changed the rules of their world. Not of our world, just of theirs. The first effect of the new rules was to make it profitable for the poor to behave in the short term in ways that were destructive in the long term. Their second effect was to mask these long term losses – to subsidize irretrievable mistakes. We tried to provide more for the poor and produced more poor instead. We tried to remove the barriers to escape from poverty, and inadvertently built a trap.

4. Another important mechanism that helps impulsive people reach decent long-run outcomes is tradition enforced by social pressure. The impulsive are swayed more by guilt and shame than careful calculations about the distant future. In *Coming Apart*, Murray shows that over the last few decades, this tradition/social pressure mechanism has gradually broken down for the working class – and transformed the working class into a dysfunctional leisure class. The welfare state is an important underlying cause of this transformation: Removing short-run feedback led to worse behavior, which undermined traditional norms about work and family, which reduced social pressure, which led to worse behavior.

5. Murray doesn't just explain poverty; he explains elites' failure to understand poverty. Elites live in a high-IQ, low-impulsiveness Bubble. When they introspect, they correctly conclude that the welfare state has little effect on *their* behavior. They then incorrectly infer that the welfare state has little effect on *anyone*'s behavior. If elites understood the world outside their Bubble a little better, they would have foreseen – and largely avoided – the welfare state's negative effects on work and family.

In sum: Murray wrote *Losing Ground* first, but the best way to grasp his perspective on poverty is to start with *The Bell Curve*, move on to *Losing Ground*, and finish with *Coming Apart*. You have to connect the dots yourself, but Murray's Big Picture is both clear and plausible.

* If memory serves me, Brink made these comments after Arnold ended the “official” part of the videotape. So they probably don’t appear in the footage Arnold uploaded.

March 12, 2012

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Discussing Charles Murray.” *EconLog*, March 9, 2012.

The Barber (Not) Next Door

Today I strolled through my childhood neighborhood. Northridge, California. When I passed by the corner house that a barber owned long ago, I imagined the following dialog:

Stagnationist: So the world just keeps getting better and better, eh?
Well let me ask you: How many barbers can afford to buy a home in this neighborhood today?

Me: Few.

S: Make that zero.

Me: Fair enough.

S: So isn't this a perfect example proving that life has gotten worse for the typical American since the Seventies?

Me: Do you remember what this neighborhood was like in the Seventies?

S: Nope.

Me: Well, I do. When I was a little kid, there were vast expanses of empty dirt in every direction. This neighborhood had no grass, just tumbleweeds. There were virtually no restaurants. Few shops. The mall was already here, but it was a lot smaller and tackier.

S: Your point?

Me: Barbers could afford to live in this neighborhood back when this neighborhood was in the middle of nowhere. So the right question to ask yourself is: Can barbers still afford to live in the middle of nowhere? Well, can they?

S: I suppose.

Me: Indeed they can. And thanks to developments like the Internet, today's "middle of nowhere" is far more stimulating than the poshest neighborhoods during the heyday of disco.

July 29, 2011

Immigration Restrictions as Affirmative Action

One of my closest conservative friends is chronically angry about (a) immigration and (b) affirmative action. The irony is that the immigration restrictions he so passionately favors *are* affirmative action – for native-born workers.

Advocates of standard affirmative action see the low percentage of minorities that employers would hire in a free market. They hastily infer that employers' bad motives are the reason why minorities fare poorly. And they respond by bullying employers to hire more minorities – and scoffing at non-minorities who object that they're being treated unfairly.

Advocates of immigration restrictions, similarly, see the low percentage of natives that employers would hire in a free market. They hastily infer that employers' bad motives are the reason why natives fare poorly. And they respond by bullying employers to hire more natives – and scoffing at foreigners who object that they're being treated unfairly.

The key difference, of course, is that immigration restrictions are *vastly* harsher than standard affirmative action policies. The dream of standard affirmative action policies is proportionality: If blacks are 13% of the population, blacks should have 13% of every job in the country. The dream of immigration restrictions, in contrast, is total exclusion: If natives are 5%

of the world population, natives should have 100% of every job in the country. Neither policy achieves these dreams, but the severity of the enforcement matches the magnitude of the desired social engineering.

We enforce standard affirmative action with sporadic lawsuits against employers. The government occasionally plays the role of the plaintiff, but for the most part we wait for an employee to file a grievance. The worse-case scenario: The employer pays hefty financial damages and rehires the plaintiff. With immigration laws, in contrast, enforcement focuses on foreign workers. They endure the daily indignities of unpersonhood.¹ And when they're caught, they face a rather different worst-case scenario: deportation to Third World misery.²

Conservatives usually think that “oppressed minorities” should spend a lot less time complaining about unfair treatment and a lot more time improving their skills and work ethic. Fair point, but the same holds for native-born Americans who complain that immigrants are taking their jobs. Employers aren’t saints, but they have a strong financial incentive to hire the best person for the job. If they don’t think that person is you, they’re probably right.

November 7, 2011

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Define Courage: The Jose Antonio Vargas Story.” *EconLog*, June 23, 2011.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Deportation Statistics.” *EconLog*, August 21, 2011.

III

Everyday Evil

The Economics and Philosophy of the Cruise Ship

I've taken cruises to Bermuda, the Bahamas, and in the Mediterranean and Black Seas. And of course I'm not one to just sit back and enjoy the food. My mind soon wanders back to economics and philosophy. Tyler Cowen's recent post on cruising has inspired me to share my reflections.¹

At least on the cruises I've been on, passengers *never see* cruise employees off-duty. How is that possible? Simple: According to their terms of employment, the workers have to return to their decks if they aren't doing their job. The upshot is that the workers divide their time between the sunlit upperworld where they wait on the spoiled passengers, and their Morlockian below-the-waterline home.

Who would take such an offer? The answer, almost invariably, is people from Third World countries. The captains, officers, and managers come from Europe and America, but virtually no one else. Someone from India, Thailand, Indonesia, or Cuba might be willing to endure these hardships for as little as \$350 a week, but not too many Americans would.

I have no doubt that most passengers on cruise ships would feel sick if they spent much time thinking about the lives of the people who serve them. How can they sit there ordering second lobsters and sunning

themselves when fellow human beings on board cannot even enjoy the sunlight or the evening breeze after completing a 14-hour day?

However, a little economics can put most of this angst to rest. Yes, the cruise workers' lives are hard compared to what Americans are used to. But their lives are quite good compared to what they can expect back in their home countries. An unskilled Indian could easily earn ten times as much money on a ship as he could in his village.

Furthermore, if you stopped cruising out of moral indignation, you would hurt the workers, not help them. Your behavior would make it harder to get a job on a cruise ship, which means that more people will be stuck in their native countries earning one-tenth as much. Some favor.

Nevertheless, labor economics 101 did not completely put my mind at rest. Yes, the workers are better off than they would be at home. But then it struck me: Many of these workers are far more qualified than Americans who earn as much money as they do without having to live like Morlocks. Cruise ships employ world-class waiters, who would fit in at the fanciest restaurant in New York. The only thing stopping them from getting these jobs is U.S. immigration law.

Undoubtedly most of my fellow passengers fully supported our immigration laws. So when I looked at their faces, I couldn't help thinking: You people *really do exploit and oppress* the employees of this cruise ship. As consumers, you expand the workers' job options and help them build a better life for themselves. But as voters, you have done everything you could to keep these poor people from competing in First World labor markets on equal terms. In a just world, your diligent assistant waiter from India might be your boss.

July 21, 2005

Notes

1. Cowen, Tyler. “Are Cruise Ships a Libertarian Paradise?” *Marginal Revolution*, July 19, 2005.

Immigration, Trespassing, and Socialism

To trespass is to enter a piece of land without the owner's consent. What should we infer, then, when people argue that illegal immigrants are guilty of trespassing?

At first glance, the trespassing shoe doesn't fit. The typical illegal immigrant:

1. Occupies his place of residence with his landlord's consent.
2. Occupies his place of work with his employer's consent.
3. Occupies each place he shops with the merchant's consent.

Indeed, it is precisely because of these facts that the law actively punishes employers for hiring illegal immigrants. The government doesn't merely *alert* employers to the fact that an employer is an illegal immigrant, then allow the employer to take whatever action he deems appropriate. Instead, the government makes it illegal for an employer to knowingly invite an illegal immigrant to come work for him.

At least this is how things appear on the surface. How then could illegal immigration constitute trespassing, surface facts notwithstanding?

There's really only one way: If the government – and not landlords, employers, and merchants – is the true owner of the nation's homes, businesses, and stores. *If* the government is the legitimate owner of all the

property in the nation, then and only then do you become a trespasser simply by entering any piece of property in the nation without the government's consent.

The name for the view that government (or “the people” if you prefer) rightfully owns everything, of course, is socialism.¹ The socialist needn’t believe that everything government does is right. He does however need to believe that government *has* a right to do anything to everything – and everyone – under its rule. (Why *everyone*, and not just *everything*? Because by remaining on the government’s land, you’re consenting to its rules. Love it or leave it).

Socialism is an internally consistent doctrine. You can’t sway the true believer with moral counter-examples. No matter what godawful thing the government does, the socialist can say:

1. The government has a right to use the nation’s resources however it wishes.
2. When in doubt, see #1.

A few decades ago, the world was full of people who found socialism morally plausible – or even true. In those days, the claim that “Unless socialism is true, illegal immigrants aren’t trespassing,” would have little force. It might even become an argument *for* socialism.

In our post-Soviet age, fortunately, socialism has become extremely morally implausible to almost everyone. “Unless socialism is true, illegal immigrants aren’t trespassing,” should be an awkward dilemma for even the harshest critics of immigration. So I have to ask them: Would you rather embrace socialism – or abandon one of your most rhetorically powerful arguments against immigration?

November 12, 2012

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Richter Back in Print.” *EconLog*, June 7, 2010.

One Day at ICE: A Dialogue on the Philosophy of Immigration

My lecture “Immigration Restrictions: A Solution in Search of a Problem” begins with the following hypothetical:

Moved by the plight of Haitian earthquake victims, you go to Haiti to aid in the relief efforts. After two weeks, you’re ready to go home. But when you arrive at the airport, your airline tells you that you don’t have legal permission to travel to the United States. You head over to the U.S. embassy, but they stonewall you. “Why can’t I go?” “The United States government does not have to explain itself to you.”¹

Here’s how I imagine the full conversation.

You: Why are you denying me permission to travel to the U.S.?

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE] Agent: You just can’t go. End of story.

You: Why not? There’s got to be a reason.

ICE Agent: Sir, I don’t have to give you a reason.

You: This is going to ruin my life! Have you looked outside the embassy window? People here are literally eating dirt.²

ICE Agent: It doesn't matter. You can't come, and I refuse to tell you why.

You: Well, it would have to be a pretty good reason to do something so awful to me...

ICE Agent: No comment.

You: Look, I'm not a criminal. I'm not a parasite. I'm not asking for charity. I've got a job and an apartment.

ICE Agent: Unfortunately, you don't have legal permission to work at that job or live in that apartment.

You: Pleeeease just tell me the reason I can't go home!

ICE Agent: Home, you say?

You: Uh... yea.

ICE Agent: Wait a second. You were *born* in the United States?

You: Yes.

ICE Agent: *Ooooooooooooooooooooooh!* In that case, we *do* need to give you a good reason why you can't come to the United States.

You: Great. So what's your "good reason"?

ICE Agent: We don't have one. [Briefly types on his computer.] Have a good trip home.

You: Wait a second. I was born in Miami. You're telling me that if I was born 712 miles to the southeast here in Haiti, you would have forced me to spend the rest of my life here, eating dirt?!

ICE Agent: U.S. policy, sir.

You: Even though you don't have any good reason to do so?

ICE Agent: Correct.

You: Even though I'm not asking for charity? Even though I've got an employer happy to employ me and a landlord happy to house me?

ICE Agent: Exactly.

You: [Feels brief shock of moral horror, then shrugs.] Lucky for me I was born in Miami.

ICE Agent: Yep. Enjoy your flight. [Looks up at a long line of hungry Haitians.] Next!

November 11, 2011

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Immigration Restrictions: A Solution in Search of a Problem.” *EconLog*, September 17, 2010.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “The Quick Fix: For the Love of God, Give Every Haitian a Green Card.” *EconLog*, April 19, 2008.

The Prohibition of Evacuation

When disaster looms, governments routinely evacuate their citizens. At a minimum, they urge them to leave the danger zone. They normally supplement this cheap talk with stronger nudges like the Emergency Alert System and official door-to-door warnings. Governments occasionally even *require* their citizens to get out of Dodge.

Evacuation policy blends humanitarian and pragmatic motives. If you care about people, getting them out of harm's way is common sense. But even when governments feel little sympathy for disaster victims, they try to evacuate them anyway. As long as you're under pressure to "do something" in the face of disaster, it's vastly cheaper to prevent people from *becoming* disaster victims than it is to rescue them after they've already *become* disaster victims. Better still, evacuees foot most of their own rescue bill; the government installs the "Evacuation Route" signs, but the population flees in their own cars with their own gas. People who stay and lose everything, in contrast, are in no position to practice self-help.

On reflection, the moral and practical logic of evacuation doesn't stop at national borders. (Logic rarely does). From a humanitarian point of view, letting people leave dangerous countries is only common sense. The fewer people who experience a disaster, the better. From a pragmatic point of view, moreover, allowing an anxious foreigner to emigrate at his own

expense is far cheaper than bailing him out after tragic events leave him a desperate refugee. Better for the international community to let people save themselves from minor tragedies than rescue them from major tragedies.

In practice, of course, the world's governments brutally discourage cross-national evacuation.¹ Suppose you foresee a natural or social disaster for your country. If you wisely try to get out Dodge, the world's immigration restrictions dog you at every turn.² Once disaster hits, you *might* be able to apply for refugee status. But as we've seen, that's a long shot. The safe countries may eventually take you in if the mood strikes them. But it's an uphill political battle. Whatever you think about immigration in general, desperate refugees look like a big burden on taxpayers.

The root problem, of course, is that governments spurn the logic of international evacuation. Instead of encouraging non-citizens to leave dangerous countries post-haste, they impose deadly bureaucratic delays. And when a refugee crisis emerges, safe countries are shocked – shocked! – by the horror. Their complicity – the fact that their own immigration restrictions prevented the refugees from saving themselves back when there was still time – never enters their minds.

My point, as usual, is that open borders is justice, not charity.³ Saving perfect strangers may be a matter of charity.⁴ But letting strangers save themselves with the willing assistance of people other than yourself is a matter of justice.

September 14, 2015

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Vietnam’s 300 Days of Open Borders: Operation Passage to Freedom.” *EconLog*, July 3, 2012.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Immigration, Misanthropy, and the Holocaust.” *EconLog*, August 4, 2013.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “America Should Open Its Borders: My Opening Statement for the Reason Immigration Debate.” *EconLog*, April 23, 2014.
4. Caplan, Bryan. “The Stranger.” *EconLog*, January 24, 2011; Caplan, Bryan. “Zwolinski, the Drowning Child. and the Good Samaritan.” *EconLog*, February 16, 2012.

The Berlin Wall: In or Out?

Last month, I returned to the Berlin Wall. It was nearly gone the first time I saw it, but now almost every vestige of its horror has been erased. With a key exception: the Asisi Panorama – a museum that feels like time travel back to the dark days of the Cold War. In the atrium, you can read uplifting quotes from the likes of East German dictator Erich Honecker:

Securing the border is the sovereign right of each and every country – this includes our German Democratic Republic. The Wall will still remain in place in 50 and even 100 years, if the reasons for its existence have not been eliminated. (January 19, 1989)

Almost everyone sees the Berlin Wall as an unmistakable sign of evil. So do I. What puzzles me, though, is why so few people wonder, “Why aren’t other countries’ walls morally comparable?” The standard answer, of course, is that decent countries build walls to keep people “out,” while East Germany built the Berlin Wall to keep people “in.” But this is a lot of moral work to hang on two prepositions.

Suppose, for example, that the East German government closed its airspace to Western aviation and used the Berlin Wall to prevent anyone from leaving the surrounded city of *West* Berlin. Honecker could have even

told his citizens, “You’re free to move to West Berlin, but since we’ve got it surrounded, don’t expect to enjoy too many Western luxuries.” Despite his oppressive intent, Honecker would, grammatically speaking, be keeping West Berliners *out* of East Germany, not holding East Germans *in* East Germany.

To make the hypothetical even starker: Imagine the East Germany government legally granted independence to a one-mile strip of land along its entire border. Call it Mauerland. All of the citizens of Mauerland are former officers of the East German border guard; their country is just one big, deadly wall. East Germany then abolishes all laws against emigration; everyone is free to leave. Unfortunately, the sovereign state of Mauerland refuses to grant visas or overflight permission to anyone without the East Germans’ approval. When challenged, they say, “Mauerland, like the United States, has every right to keep foreigners out. You keep out Mexicans. We keep out East Germans.”

The obvious reply is that the U.S. is a democracy and Mauerland is a dictatorship. But not so fast. If the citizens of Mauerland are a few hand-picked veterans of East Germany’s ruling Socialist Unity Party, they could calmly adopt a scrupulously democratic constitution – then freely elect a government that keeps East Germans out. Sure, this preserves the power of their fraternal ally, but don’t all democracies make sleazy deals with dictatorships?

Faced with this hypothetical, you could challenge East Germany’s right to create Mauerland in the first place. Governments do not legitimately own all the land inside their borders; that rightfully belongs to individual property owners. To make Mauerland happen, the East German government would have to trample their rights, exiling politically unreliable people from

the border zone. (Indeed, that's what the East German government actually did).

If you take this intellectual route, however, conventional immigration restrictions also come under suspicion. The top reason countries restrict immigration is to stop native employers, merchants, and landlords from consensually trading with foreigners without government permission. Unless governments legitimately own all the land inside their borders, what right does any government have to interfere with these transactions?

Alternately, you could accept governments' ultimate ownership of all the land within their borders, but then add that "Property is not absolute." If someone has to run across your land without permission to save his life, he's entitled to do it. The same goes if you sadistically use your property rights to trap someone in desperate poverty. Just because you own it, doesn't mean you're entitled to use it to inflict great harm for trivial gain.

This route, too, however, places immigration restrictions under suspicion. Why? Because they also inflict great harm on would-be immigrants for trivial gain.¹ How would you like to be trapped in Haiti?

When I think about the Berlin Wall, I am far more appalled than when I think about the U.S. wall with Mexico. I freely admit it. In part, I feel worse because I think it's far worse to be trapped in East Germany than to be trapped in Mexico. In part, it's because I detest Communism to my core. In part, it's because Communists victimized my immediate family. But the main reason is hedonic adaptation; the more familiar an evil becomes, the less bad it feels.² Still, I'm not someone to let my emotions cloud my thinking. Whenever I see a border wall, I always see the Berlin Wall. And when people casually remark, "Our walls our fine because they keep people

out, not in,” I shake my head at their thoughtless refusal to see – or even ponder – the fundamental similarities.

September 11, 2018

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Righteous Scofflaw.” *EconLog*, April 8, 2014.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Happiness Research: Get Used to It.” *EconLog*, March 1, 2006.

The Berlin Cage: A Dialogue

I figured out a way to make my recent thought experiments on the Berlin Wall even starker.¹

Suppose you wake up one day and find yourself in a cage. You see a guy on the other side and the following conversation ensues.

You: Any idea how I got in this cage?

Guy: You're not *in a cage*.

You: What do you mean?

Guy: You're *outside my border wall*.

You: [stunned silence]

Guy: You're free to go wherever you want, as long as you stay out of my territory.

You: I'm in a cage; where am I supposed to go?

Guy: Not my problem. After all, I'm not keeping you *in*; I'm keeping you *out*.

You: So it was you that built this "border wall" last night?

Guy: Yep.

You: And everything on the other side of these walls is your legitimate territory?

Guy: By Jove, I think he's got it!

You: So you built a tiny square wall, and that entitles you to virtually all the land on Earth?

Guy: What, are you a communist?

You: No. You're a kidnapper.

Guy: [offended] How so?

You: You make up a ridiculously lax rule of property acquisition, then use this sophistry to imprison me.

Guy: [offended] I repeat: To imprison you, I would have to hold you *in*. But I'm not; I'm keeping you *out*.

You: Pure sophistry! All you have to do to claim the world is build a tiny fence and say, “I own everything except the area inside it”?!

Guy: Well, what's your theory of property?

You: I never worked one out. But yours is crazy.

Guy: Most of the people around here support me.

You: But plenty of them don't?

Guy: True, but it's a democracy – and the majority voted that you're not allowed on *any* of our lands.

You: I've heard enough. I'm climbing your “border wall.”

Guy: Communist!

You: You seem like a communist to me. I'm getting out before you start shooting on sight.

Guy: Good idea!

You: [facepalms; flees]

September 13, 2018

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Berlin Wall: In or Out?.” *EconLog*, September 11, 2018.

The Economics and Philosophy of the Wall

I usually dislike movies based on true stories. But *The Tunnel*, a tale of five heroes who tunnel under the Berlin Wall to rescue their family and friends, is excellent. We don't just vicariously enjoy the excitement of digging to freedom. We see the tyranny of Communism in its most visceral form – “No one gets out of here alive.”

For libertarians, morality doesn't get much clearer than this. But almost all non-libertarians will be equally certain that the tunnelers are good and the East German border guards and secret police are evil. My question is: Why, on this one issue, do non-libertarians so readily accept the stereotypical libertarian position?

Consider: Most East Germans who wanted to flee to the West were probably “economic refugees.” Take a look at the emigration numbers.¹ If people were going West for freedom, they might as well have left ASAP in 1949 or 1950. Many did, of course. But the outflow continued year after year. The most obvious explanation: The West's living standards kept pulling further and further ahead of the East's, attracting emigrants who cared a lot more about prosperity than freedom.

So what? Well, conservatives are notoriously hostile to “mere” economic refugees. And if you point out that these economic refugees were

selfishly trying to escape redistributionist policies, it's hard to see why liberals would cheer them on. Again, I'm not denying that conservatives and liberals are confident that people trying to escape from East Germany were in the right. I just don't understand the reason for their confidence.

A few possibilities:

1. It's OK to flee from a dictatorship, even if your motive is economic gain and your action undermines redistribution. Question: What if the Berlin Wall enjoyed democratic support? Would it have been OK then?
2. It's OK to keep people out, but not to keep them in. Question: Suppose the Berlin Wall had been erected by *West* Germany to keep out illegal immigrants. Would it have been OK then?
3. When a nation has been "artificially" divided, it's OK to ignore restrictions on freedom of movement *within* the nation's "true borders." Question: Where in the world do "true borders" come from? Philosophers may say "the social contract," but it's obvious that almost all real-world borders have been set by force. See for example what happened to Germany after WWI and WWII.
4. It's OK to ignore restrictions on freedom of movement if they split up families and close friends. Question: Doesn't this mean that current family reunification quotas are actually monstrously strict? If this seems like hysterical libertarian rhetoric, watch the scene in *The Tunnel* when people explain who they want to smuggle out. People weren't just willing to risk their lives for their children, spouses, parents, and siblings. They also risked their lives for boyfriends, girlfriends, friends, family of friends, and more.

Frankly, this is yet another issue where I have trouble even imagining what an intelligent, thoughtful non-libertarian would say.² Can anyone help me

out?

August 6, 2006

Notes

1. Judt, Matthias. *DDR-Geschichte in Dokumenten [GDR History in Documents]*. Berlin, 1997, pp. 545-46.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “How Dems and Reps Differ: Against the Conventional Wisdom.” *EconLog*, September 7, 2008.

Ten Points on the Wrong Side of History

In the last few weeks, several critics have told me things like: “History will not be kind,” “History will judge you,” and “You are on the wrong side of history.” My initial reaction is sheer puzzlement. If my critics can’t persuade me with the evidence they currently possess, do they really think they can persuade me with evidence they *claim* they’re going to acquire in the future? One carefully-tailored bet would be worth a thousand of their Cassandra cries.¹

My considered reaction, though, is more elaborate.

1. “History,” an abstract object, never thinks or says anything. So if these claims are meaningful, they’re about *historians*.
2. The underlying assumption of these warnings is: What historians think in a century is a very strong predictor of what’s actually true.
3. This is a reasonable claim for narrow factual matters. The passage of time doesn’t just give historians more opportunities to collect evidence. It also cools their emotions. This is why I’d far rather read history than news.
4. For the Big Picture, however, historians’ consensus is questionable at best. Most obviously, their liberal bias is overwhelming, with over 30 Democrats for every Republican at top U.S. history departments.² And while you could argue reverse causation, you can’t argue it with a straight

face. The vast majority of historians were very liberal years before they began seriously studying history.

5. When I actually look at historians' Big Pictures, they're even worse than their liberal bias suggests. Economic illiteracy is rampant.³ Social Desirability Bias rules the day. And moral relativism reigns supreme.⁴

6. Historians take little notice of me today, and I expect future historians will do the same.

7. If current or future historians did notice me, they would probably assess me negatively, because my Big Picture starkly diverges from their Big Picture.

8. But since I disrespect historians' judgments on such matters, why would I care?

9. If my critics really wanted to get my attention, they would predict that *I myself* will eventually revise my views.⁵

10. I'm happy to bet against such claims, though admittedly my critics have to trust my honesty for such bets to work.

November 30, 2016

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. "What Does the Betting Norm Tax?" *EconLog*, March 14, 2009.
2. Langbert, Mitchell, Anthony Quain, and Daniel Klein. "Faculty Voter Registration in Economics, History, Journalism, Law, and Psychology." *Econ Journal Watch* 13.3 (2016): 422-451.

3. Caplan, Bryan. “The Economic Illiteracy of High School History.” *EconLog*, November 20, 2013.
4. Caplan, Bryan. “The Cultural Relativism of Columbus Apologists.” *EconLog*, October 8, 2007.
5. Caplan, Bryan. “The Anti-Hansonian Heuristic.” *EconLog*, August 18, 2008.

Columbus: The Far Left is Dead Right

By the time Christopher Columbus appeared in Lisbon in 1477 an Old World slave trade was thriving in the eastern Atlantic between West Africa, the Atlantic islands, and Europe. In his famous letter on his first voyage he informed Ferdinand and Isabella he could, with their help, give them “slaves, as many as they shall order.” On his second voyage Columbus loaded five hundred Indian slaves aboard returning caravels. On the last leg of his voyage to Cadiz, “about two hundred of these Indians died,” a passenger recorded, appending, “We cast them into the sea.” In this manner the discoverer of the New World launched the transatlantic slave trade, at first in Indians and from west to east.

—James Rawley, with Stephen Behrendt, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*

The far left’s radical critique of Columbus Day rubs a lot of people the wrong way. But the facts are on their side. Columbus was not just a brutal slaver; he was a pioneer of slavery. I flipped through a dozen books on Columbus and slavery in the library today, and none of them disputes this — though the hagiographies generally omit “slavery” from the index.

Can you condemn a man just for being a slaver? Of course. It’s almost as bad as you can get. And Columbus didn’t even have the lame excuses of

a Thomas Jefferson, like “I grew up with it,” or “I couldn’t afford not to do it.”

The lamest excuse of all is that we have to judge Columbus by the standards of his time. For this is nothing but the cultural relativism that defenders of Western civilization so often decry. If some cultures and practices are better than others, then we can fairly hold up a mirror to Columbus and the Spanish conquerors, and find theirs to be among the worst.

But hasn’t the European colonization of the New World been an improvement? Even if this were true, it would be no reason to have a special day to honor Columbus and his ilk. If Mengele had cured cancer, should we celebrate Mengele Day? In any case, you’ve got to ask: Compared to what? The benefits of Western culture would have spread at least as rapidly if the Europeans had arrived in the New World as traders and teachers instead of conquerors and slavers.

Now you could say: Every great man has feet of clay. That depends, as Yoda would say, on what you consider great. There are plenty of people who made great contributions to science, business, philosophy, literature, music, and history without practicing slavery and murder. These are the men and women who might merit a day of remembrance.

Personally, I’d like to honor Lord Acton, the great historian who taught us better than anyone else to dishonor “great men” like Columbus. He’s well-known for his eloquent slogan: “Suffer no man and no cause to escape the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong.” But I like his longer statement even better:

I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men, with a favorable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption it is against the holders of power, increasing as the power increases. Historic responsibility has to make up for want of legal responsibility. Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men...

October 9, 2006

Some Men Just Want to Watch Mexico Burn

In the introduction to *La Vida*, famed anthropologist Oscar Lewis unfavorably compares Puerto Rico to Mexico:

But perhaps the crucial difference in the history of the two countries was the development of a great revolutionary tradition in Mexico and its absence in Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans sought greater autonomy from Spain during the nineteenth century, but they were never able to organize a revolutionary struggle for their freedom, and the single attempt along this line, at Lares, was short-lived and never received mass support. By contrast the Mexicans fought for their independence from Spain between 1810 and 1821, drove out the French in 1866 and later produced the great revolution of 1910-20 with its glorious ideals of social justice. In the course of these struggles great heroes emerged, men who have become symbols of the Mexican spirit of revolution and independence.¹

La Vida was published in 1965, just 45 years after the end of the Mexican Revolution. Lewis personally knew many Mexicans who lived through it. But what actually happened during this “great revolution” with its “glorious

ideals of social justice”? The best paper I could find on the topic is Robert McCaa’s 2003 “Missing Millions: The Demographic Costs of the Mexican Revolution”.² After a detailed review of earlier estimates, McCaa deploys new techniques to reach a grim conclusion:

The human cost of the Revolution was paid mainly in blood. Of a total demographic cost of 2.1 million, excess deaths accounted for two-thirds, lost births one-fourth, and emigration considerably less than one-tenth of the total... The best two-sex inverse projection to 1930, taking into account the age and sex distribution of the population in that year, points to some 3 million missing as of 1921. Census error in the 1921 enumeration reduces this figure by 1 million. Two-thirds of the remainder was due to one factor: excess mortality (1.4 million deaths), with 350,000 more male deaths than female. Lost births were substantially less at 550 thousand. Smaller still, at less than 10 percent of the total loss, was emigration to the United States, with the persisting number of male “refugees,” generously defined, slightly more than 100,000, and females about three-fourths of this figure.

The basic history of the Mexican Revolution, moreover, was hardly “heroic”:

[O]nly six months passed between Francisco I. Madero’s pronouncement of revolution (November 20, 1910) and the overthrow of the old dictator Porfirio Díaz. The resignation of Díaz came in late spring 1911 and was accomplished with little violence or destruction. The fighting scarcely began until 1911... Victory at

Ciudad Juárez came to the revolutionaries on May 10, 1911, after a siege lasting only a couple of days... Although the fall of Díaz was achieved due to uprisings throughout the republic, the cost of the Revolution, to this point, was probably only a few thousand deaths.

The real fighting began as the revolutionaries trained their weapons on one another over the course of the following six years... Zapata, having waited four months to rebel against the hated Díaz, did not allow four weeks to pass before rebelling against the enormously popular Madero. In late November 1911, Zapata, "tired of waiting" for Madero to carry through an agrarian revolution, according to the conventional view, denounced Mexico's first democratically elected president by proclaiming the Plan of Ayala. Yet, until 1912, Zapatistas did not pose a serious threat to the Madero government. Elsewhere regional bands (and bandits), some with plans, others without, escalated the plundering of the countryside, hamlets, and towns. As is well known, within two years of Díaz's resignation the nation slid into chaos...

With the assassination of Madero on February 21, 1913 — probably on the order of the Madero-appointed commander in chief of the federal army, Victoriano Huerta—civil war erupted. The usurper proved incapable of suppressing the many revolts... [A]fter the failure of the Convention of Aguascalientes to resolve the differences of regional warlords, an even bloodier phase of the Revolution began, as, once again, the victors turned on one another. The year 1915 was the year of hunger. Marauding bands destroyed the few crops that were sown, many before they could be harvested. Destruction continued into 1916, although with the defeat of the

northern chieftain Pancho Villa at the Battle of Celaya in April 1915, the violence began to wane, however slowly. Devastation was made worse by the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918/19, to be examined in detail below.

McCaa thoughtfully concludes:

Given the magnitude of the human losses caused by the Mexican Revolution, the silence of some scholars and disbelief by others is surprising...

For the Americas, both North and South, the Mexican Revolution was the greatest demographic catastrophe of the twentieth century. From a millennial perspective, the human cost of the Mexican Revolution was exceeded only by the devastation of Christian conquest, colonization, and accompanying epidemics, nearly four centuries earlier.

How then could as knowledgeable a scholar as Lewis credulously praise the sordid bloodbath that was the Mexican Revolution? As a Marxist, he was obviously predisposed to positivity. His gushing, however, would probably resonate with many non-Marxists, too.

So what would possess anyone to so gush? One could say, “You can’t make *huevos rancheros* without breaking eggs. The war was tragic, but the results were great.” Since we’re talking about Mexico, though, this seems absurd. Sure, it’s a middle-income country, but given its proximity to the U.S., gravity alone should have turned it into a peaceful, First World country by now. Violence, moreover, remains a grave problem to this day.

The legacy of the Mexican Revolution is one of the better explanations for why a peaceful, prosperous Mexico has yet to emerge.

In any case, people who admire revolutions rarely bother with counterfactual history. What excites them is revolution itself. Revolution is *romantic*. The vision of tearing down the wickedness of the world, serving wrong-doers their just deserts, charging barricades with our brave leaders, and building a better world on top of the ashes is a thrilling story. Counting corpses and asking, “What was it all for?,” in contrast, is a real downer.

If you share this romantic vision, you might even welcome my analysis: “Yes, I’m inspired by revolutionary idealism. At least they *tried*.” Yet calmly considered, this romantic vision is inexcusable. Launching a bloody war without even asking, “How likely is this war to improve the world?” is as “romantic” as drunk driving on a playground. Giving revolutionaries credit for “trying” is ridiculous. If you combine brutality with wishful thinking about the consequences, your real goal isn’t to make those consequences a reality. Your real goal is just to exercise brutality.

So why did Lewis gush over the Mexican Revolution? Batman’s butler got it right: “Well, because he thought it was good sport. Because some men aren’t looking for anything logical, like money. They can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn.” I’ve learned a lot from Lewis, but the less real-world influence people like him have, the better.

March 12, 2019

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Apology for a Trainwreck.” *EconLog*, 21 February, 2019.
2. McCaa, Robert. “Missing Millions: The Demographic Costs of the Mexican Revolution.” *Mexican Studies*, 2003.

Where Eugenics Goes Wrong: The Implications of Comparative Advantage

Almost no one wants to be called a “eugenicist.” It’s a term of abuse. But if you go back to the origin of the term, it basically amounts to the following two claims:

Claim #1: One of the main causes – if not *the* main cause – of economic, cultural, and other forms of success is genetic.

Claim #2: Policy-makers can make their societies more successful by improving the quality of their societies’ genes. For instance, the famous eugenicist Karl Pearson maintained that Britain should only admit immigrants who “raised the average”:

What is definitely clear, however, is that our own Jewish boys do not form from the standpoint of intelligence a group markedly superior to our natives. But that is the sole condition under which we are prepared to admit that immigration should be allowed.

These days, there is massive empirical support for Claim #1. The result is that people who fear Pearson-like policies engage in a lot of silly ad

hominem attacks on defenders of Claim #1. And on the other hand, some defenders of Claim #1 are happy to follow in Pearson's footsteps by advocating policies inspired by Claim #2.

The problem, however, is that Claim #2 simply does not follow from Claim #1. Even if genetics explained ALL differences in success, many policies that raise average genetic quality would backfire. How? Let me begin with a thought experiment, then explain the general principle.

Suppose we have an isolated society in which everyone is a genius. Let's call them the Brains. Who takes out the garbage? A Brain, obviously. Who does the farming? Again, Brains.

Now what happens if the geniuses come into contact with a society where everyone is of average intelligence at best? Let's call them the Brawns. If the Brains allow the Brawns to join their society, the average genetic quality of the Brains' society plummets. *But everyone is better off as a result!* Now the Brains can specialize in jobs that require high intelligence, and the Brawns can take over the menial labor. Total production goes up.

This is an example of what economists call the Law of Comparative Advantage. Trade between two people or groups increases total production even if one person or group is worse at everything. Suppose, for example, that Brains can make 5 Computer Programs or 10 Bushels of Wheat per day, and Brawns can make .1 Computer Programs or 5 Bushels of Wheat per day.

Brains and Brawns can still trade to mutual benefit: Just have one Brain switch from farming to programming (+5 Programs, -10 Bushels of Wheat), and three Brawns switch from programming to farming (-.3 Programs, +15

Bushels of Wheat), and total production rises by 4.7 Programs and 5 Bushels of Wheat.

My colleague David Levy and his co-author Sandra Peart have taken Karl Pearson to task for his laughable claims about the ability of Jewish immigrants.¹ But the deeper lesson is that even if Pearson's judgment on this point were correct, his policy recommendation would be counter-productive on his own terms. Yes, admitting geniuses leads to greater achievement; but admitting non-geniuses achieves the same effect, by encouraging native citizens to switch to brainier work.

Of course, this doesn't mean that improving the quality of your societies' genes *never* leads to greater success. Holding the number of people constant, more quality leads to more results. But an increase in the number of non-geniuses, holding the number of geniuses constant, will also *normally* cause higher levels of achievement through specialization and trade.

Thus, there is no reason for opponents of Pearson-like policies to pretend that twin and adoption studies don't exist, or "don't prove anything." The Law of Comparative Advantage shows that even if some people really are more productive than others in *every* respect, they have something to offer each other.

January 21, 2006

Notes

1. Levy, David, and Sandra Peart. "Statistical Prejudice: From Eugenics to Immigrants." *European Journal of Political Economy* 20, 2014.

Chabon's Unkindest Cut

I strongly oppose circumcision. In fact, I can't think of a good reason why we shouldn't punish it as child abuse.

Whether or not you agree with my conclusion, I think it's hard to deny the following claim: *Unless you have a good reason for circumcision, it is child abuse.* Cutting off a baby's healthy body parts might be justified in some situations, but justification is a must.

Most parents who circumcise their kids think they do have a justification. Maybe they're right, though I severely doubt it. It was only when I was reading Michael Chabon's latest, *Manhood for Amateurs*, though, that I saw the face of evil: A father who admitted that he had no good reason to circumcise his sons but did it anyway.

Chabon rejects the religious reasons:

That is not an argument that holds a lot of water with me. I have confused ideas of deity, heavily influenced by mind-altering years of reading science fiction, that do not often trouble me, but one thing I know for certain, and have known since the age of five or six, is that I really can't stand the God of Abraham.

He's not convinced by the "He ought to match his big brother" argument:

None of their other parts have to match. They could have different eye color, different hair, different noses, differently shaped heads.

He's not convinced by the rest either:

We had been through all of the standard arguments – hygiene, cancer prevention, psychological fitness, the Zero Mostel tradition – the first time around, with our oldest son, and found that they are all debatable at best, while there is plenty of convincing evidence that sexual pleasure is considerably diminished by the absence of a foreskin.

Chabon bypasses that big downside with a wry sci-fi reference:

But I never know how to think about that one. It is like in *A Princess of Mars*, in which we are informed that on the red planet Barsoom they have nine colors in their spectrum and not seven; I have tried and failed many times to imagine those extra Barsoomian colors.

He does not reject the analogy to female circumcision:

“It’s not one bit less barbaric than what they do over there,” my wife said. “Not one.”

“Agreed.”

Chabon doesn’t circumcise to hold his family together or even to please his wife. Instead, he finds an odd mohel willing to use a topical anesthetic, and lies to his wife to keep her on board:

“It’s not going to hurt,” I told her, though of course... I had no idea whether it was going to hurt him or not.

And then... there’s a bris! If I were going to throw one book in my lifetime, it would have been *Manhood for Amateurs* right after I finished this monstrous essay.

As a social scientist, I tend to think that once people admit that a policy is absurd and cruel, they’ll abandon it. The challenge is extracting the admission. Chabon’s tale forces me to admit that even after people admit their errors, some of them will refuse to change their ways – and many onlookers will react with mildly approving smiles.

October 29, 2009

Collective Guilt: A Socratic Dialogue

Pericles: Have you seen the latest outrage our enemies have committed against us? We have to strike back.

Socrates: Strike back against whom?

Pericles: Our enemies, as I said.

Socrates: Right. But how will we pinpoint the enemies who perpetrated this heinous act?

Pericles: [sigh] That's a fool's errand. You never know which particular enemy carried out any particular dastardly deed.

Socrates: So we should punish some of our enemies for the actions of our other enemies?

Pericles: Exactly.

Socrates: For example, if the Persians attack us, we might respond by attacking the Macedonians.

Pericles: No, no, no. If the Persians attack us, we have to respond by attacking the Persians.

Socrates: To do otherwise would be unjust?

Pericles: Indeed, unless those we attacked were in league with the Persians.

Socrates: Are all Persians in league with one another?

Pericles: What do you mean?

Socrates: Has each and every Persian freely sworn to join forces against us?

Pericles: That sounds most unlikely.

Socrates: Quite. And even if every adult Persian had indeed sworn such an oath, Persian infants and children would be incapable of such an oath?

Pericles: Yes, unless their infants and children are very unlike ours.

Socrates: So when we “strike back” against the Persians, how careful are we to spare those Persians who have not joined forces against us?

Pericles: Not careful at all, if you want the truth.

Socrates: When the Persians attack, you are careful not to respond by attacking the Macedonians.

Pericles: As already explained.

Socrates: It seems, then, that when our Persian enemies attack, we should be equally careful not to respond by attacking those Persians who remain our friends. Indeed, we should be equally careful not to respond by attacking neutral Persians who simply wish to mind their own business.

Pericles: Your approach would leave us powerless against evil. We can easily tell the difference between Persians and Macedonians. We can't easily tell the difference between Persian enemies and Persian friends and neutrals.

Socrates: Is it so hard to tell the difference between a Persian child and a Persian adult?

Pericles: No, but it is hard to burn down a town full of Persian enemies without burning Persian friends and neutrals along with them.

Socrates: I see.

Pericles: Are we done?

Socrates: Not quite. Pericles, would you mind describing the Persians' "latest outrage" against us?

Pericles: Not at all. The fiends came and burned down one of our towns. Everyone trapped within the city walls died horribly.

Socrates: A wicked deed, no doubt?

Pericles: No doubt.

Socrates: Suppose, though, that they were merely striking back against us for burning down one of their towns.

Pericles: That is not mere supposition. We burned down one of their towns last month.

Socrates: Could the Persians then invoke the same rationale as you? Could they not with justice say that they had to strike back against we Greeks, and that distinguishing Greek enemies from Greek friends and neutrals imposed an intolerable burden on them?

Pericles: The Persian fiends will say anything to justify their wickedness.

Socrates: Why, though, are Persians but not Greeks wicked for burning down entire towns?

Pericles: Our actions are retaliation; their actions are aggression.

Socrates: How does one tell the difference?

Pericles: Simple: The side that starts the fight is the aggressor.

Socrates: I presume, then, that you have exhaustively studied the history of the Greek-Persian conflict.

Pericles: Why bother? We can all see who's in the right.

Socrates: I'm puzzled, Pericles. By your stated standard, it's *impossible* to directly see who's in the right.

Pericles: How so?

Socrates: Your standard is historical: Whoever *started* the conflict is the aggressor. You cannot answer this historical question by observing *current* behavior.

Pericles: So before anyone can retaliate, they have to carefully study history?

Socrates: Given your definition of “aggression,” I see no alternative.

Pericles: But who knows what such study would reveal? We might discover that it was in fact we Greeks who drew first blood.

Socrates: True.

Pericles: And if we discovered that, then we Greeks, not those Persians, would be the evil ones.

Socrates: Logically.

Pericles: But that would imply that it was *not* evil when that Persian army burned my mother, sister, and dear baby niece alive!

Socrates: By your own reasoning, that seems to follow.

Pericles: But... killing innocent children is just plain wrong. What difference does it make if a long-dead Greek killed a hapless Persian centuries ago?

Socrates: Or if a long-dead Persian killed a hapless Greek centuries ago?

Pericles: What are you saying?

Socrates: Like most people – Greeks, Persians, Macedonians, and more – you embrace a doctrine of collective guilt. You think it morally justified to punish groups of people even if many members of these groups have done nothing wrong.

Pericles: You could put it that way.

Socrates: Yet this doctrine of collective guilt implies something almost no one believes: a duty to undertake careful historical research prior to putative retaliation.

Pericles: Somewhat odd, I admit.

Socrates: Yes. The even odder implication, though, is that if the careful historical research reveals that *we* were the initial aggressors, Persians' seemingly evil actions against personally blameless Greeks were justified.

Pericles: But that is impossible to believe.

Socrates: Indeed. And it is equally impossible to believe that if our enemies were the initial aggressors, Greeks' seemingly evil actions against personally blameless Persians were justified. Despite its popularity, this doctrine of collective guilt goes against the conscience of all mankind.

February 13, 2013

IV

Clean Hands

My Hands Are Clean

Suppose someone accuses me of being a pickpocket.¹ I respond, “I have picked no pockets, therefore I am not a pickpocket.” My accuser could naturally retort, “Oh yes you are, I have video evidence of you picking pockets on three separate occasions.”

Imagine, though, if my accuser instead declared, “There’s a lot of pickpocketing in the world. You’ve personally done nothing to stop it. That makes you a pickpocket!”

I submit that this is an absurd and unjust position. You lead with a baseless accusation. Then instead of apologizing, you use Orwellian redefinition to label virtually the entire human race as “pickpockets.” In the end, you’ve divided humanity into a teaspoon of noble anti-pickpocketing crusaders, and an ocean of vile pickpockets. The vast majority of whom have never picked a pocket in their lives.

This is exactly how I view most modern accusations of “racism” and sexism.” Imagine the anger a typical white male would provoke these days by announcing, “I am utterly blameless for whatever racism and sexism exists in our society.” Indeed, many people would take this very sentence as “proof” of the announcer’s racism and sexism.

To so react, however, is absurd and unjust. You don’t have to crusade against pickpocketing to avoid being a pickpocket, you don’t have to

crusade against racism to avoid being a racist, and you don't have to crusade against sexism to avoid being a sexist. Just keep your own hands clean. What could be more obvious?

Doesn't this view lead to self-satisfied complacency? As soon as you ask that question, you are in the vicinity of the Noble Lie. "Telling innocent people they're guilty is more motivating than telling innocent people they're innocent. So should we falsely condemn people to spur them to action." In the words of Nietzsche, "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster."

Nietzsche aside, it's far from clear that preaching near-universal guilt spurs people to action. Consider this alternative appeal: "Sure, you're an innocent bystander.² But wouldn't you rather be a *hero*?"³ Maybe, just maybe, you can motivate people to do good without slandering them first.

P.S. Don't worry, I won't call you a slanderer for failing to join my crusade against slander.

January 4, 2021

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. "Don't Pickpocket Your Students." *EconLog*, October 20, 2020.
2. Caplan, Bryan. "Sorry, Innocent Bystanders." *EconLog*, January 31, 2019.
3. Caplan, Bryan. "The Speech of Heroes." *EconLog*, January 9, 2020.

Libertarianism as Moral Overlearning

“Overlearning” is a key idea in educational psychology. One good explanation:

Overlearning is a pedagogical concept according to which newly acquired skills should be practiced well beyond the point of initial mastery, leading to automaticity.¹

In experiments, researchers often test the effects of overlearning by (a) making subjects practice until they reach 100% accuracy, then (b) practicing some more. Intuitively, though, the idea is simply to *make perfection routine*. Subtleties aside, overlearning has two big benefits.²

First, overlearning is one of the best ways to attain lifelong competence. Most people who study algebra soon forget what they learned. Who doesn’t? People who go on to study calculus – a more advanced subject that requires the routine, error-free use of algebra.³

Second, overlearning is one of the best ways to attain true Transfer of Learning.⁴ When you’re a novice driver, you can easily get into trouble if you have to drive an unfamiliar car. But once you have so much driving experience that you no longer need to think about driving, your competence generalizes to almost any automobile.

As far as Google knows, no psychologist has extended the idea of overlearning to moral reasoning. But it's a natural extension. A small child may grasp that "It's wrong to hit other kids unless they hit you first." But he often forgets this moral knowledge – or fails to apply it in unfamiliar situations. As he grows up, however, the child typically practices this principle to perfection. The moral principle pops into his head whenever and wherever he feels the slightest urge to start a fistfight.

All too often, of course, people learn but fail to overlearn. As a result, their knowledge is "inert." If you explicitly test them, they can spit out the right answer. But they frequently forget or ignore their knowledge in relevant situations. For example, a person may know the moral principle, "Everyone has a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," yet support slavery.

If you have a conscience, you should care about moral overlearning. What good is moral "knowledge" if people fail to use it? But the concept is especially pressing for libertarians. Libertarians often argue that they are merely holding governments to ordinary moral standards. It's wrong for a private individual to physically attack other people who are behaving peacefully. It's wrong for a private individual to take other people's property without their consent. So why is it OK for government to do these things? Yet non-libertarians usually find these observations unconvincing.

My claim: The fundamental difference between libertarians and non-libertarians is that libertarians have *overlearned* common-sense morality. Non-libertarians only reliably apply basic morality when society encourages them to do so. Libertarians, in contrast, deeply internalize basic morality. As a result, they apply it automatically in the absence of social pressure – and even when society *discourages* common decency.

For example, non-libertarians routinely say, “A woman has a right to use her own body as she likes.” But it never even occurs to them that this implies that prostitution should be legal. Why? Because non-libertarians only apply this principle in the exact situations where their society encourages them to do so. They learn the principle without *overlearning* it. Libertarians, in contrast, can’t help but see the logical connection between a woman’s right to use her own body and the right to have sex for money.

To take a far larger issue, people across the political spectrum would agree that, “Accepting a job offer is not a crime.” (What’s the moral equivalent of “Duh”?) But most non-libertarians see no conflict between this principle and immigration restrictions. Once you overlearn the principle, however, the whole moral landscape transforms. You suddenly see that our immigration status quo is morally comparable to the reviled Jim Crow laws.⁵ The fact that other people frown on the comparison doesn’t change the moral facts.

The “libertarianism as moral overlearning” framing is self-congratulatory. I freely admit it. Perhaps the real story is that libertarians stupidly generalize narrow moral principles to situations where they’re entirely inappropriate.* Either way, though, the concept of moral overlearning deserves your attention. If you only apply moral principles when other people encourage you to do so, how much about right and wrong do you really know?

* If that’s what you think, I highly recommend Mike Huemer’s *The Problem of Political Authority*, which explores these questions forwards and backwards.⁶

August 5, 2013

Notes

1. “Overlearning.” *Psychology Wiki*.
2. Driskell, James, Ruth Willis, and Carolyn Copper. “Effect of Overlearning on Retention.” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1992.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “Does High School Algebra Pass Cost-Benefit Test?” *EconLog*, October 17, 2012.
4. Barnett, Susan, and Stephen Ceci. “When and Where Do We Apply What We Learn?: A Taxonomy for Far Transfer.” *Psychological Bulletin*, 2002.
5. Caplan, Bryan. “Tell Me the Difference Between Jim Crow and Immigration Restrictions.” *EconLog*, March 7, 2012.
6. Caplan, Bryan. “Huemer’s Common-Sense Libertarianism.” *EconLog*, January 25, 2013.

Terrible Turnaround

We often have ethical arguments about when it's morally permissible for *us* to do seemingly terrible things to *them*. Examples:

1. When is it morally permissible for *us* to deliberately drop a nuclear bomb on *their* civilians?
2. When is it morally permissible for *us* to launch an attack that we expect will lead to ten civilian deaths for every target killed?
3. When is it morally permissible for *us* to torture one of *them*?

The general conclusion of these discussions – unsurprisingly given group-serving bias – is that it's morally permissible for *us* to do almost anything to *them*. Sure, there are a few random exceptions – it's OK to nuke their civilian population, but wrong to waterboard suspects. (Huh?) But by and large, we give ourselves a big green light.

At the same time, we almost never have ethical arguments about when it's morally permissible for *them* to do terrible things to *us*. I don't think I've ever heard a debate about:

1. When is it morally permissible for *them* to deliberately drop a nuclear bomb on *our* civilians?
2. When is it morally permissible for *them* to launch an attack that they expect will lead to ten civilian deaths for every target killed?

3. When is it morally permissible for *them* to torture one of *us*?

The most obvious rationales for these non-debates are:

- a. We're so morally upright that these hypotheticals aren't worth arguing about; they're as relevant as trolley problems.¹
- b. Regardless of our behavior, doing terrible things to us is wrong.

If you answer (a), the argument quickly bogs down in a thousand historical arguments. But if you answer (b), our double standard is terribly obvious.

September 20, 2010

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. "A Trillion Nazis Versus the Trolley Problem." *EconLog*, April 21, 2009.

Murder: A Socratic Dialogue

Glacon: Have you heard the news, Socrates? A scimitar-wielding Persian maniac just cut down three Corinthians in cold blood.

Socrates: A ghastly crime. But why are you telling me?

Glaucon: Because it just happened!

Socrates: So I gathered.

Glaucon: In Corinth! That's only fifty miles away.

Socrates: Should we get inside and bar the door?

Glaucon: [squinting] No. The Persian was killed moments after the attack.

Socrates: Then I repeat: Why are you telling me?

Glaucon: [upset] Because I assumed you would *care* about the victims!

Socrates: Well, I care a little bit. But I didn't personally know them.

Glaucon: [outraged] You're barely human, Socrates. Everyone else is outraged by this Persian crime. You should be too!

Socrates: Perhaps you're right. But one thing puzzles me.

Glaucon: [calming down] Namely?

Socrates: My friend Pythagoras has calculated the number of innocent people murdered on an average day. Do you know how many that is?

Glaucon: No.

Socrates: Fifty. And the *minimum* number of recorded daily victims is five.

Glaucon: What a hellish world we live in!

Socrates: Perhaps. Now that you know this, I have to ask: Do you plan to be outraged every day for the rest of your life?

Glaucon: [taken aback] Well, those numbers are pretty bad, but...

Socrates: But what?

Glaucon: Well, life is for the living. I'm not going to be angry and miserable every day just because vile crimes are happening somewhere on Earth. It's a big place, you know.

Socrates: Very wise. But then why did you say I was "barely human" for having the same reaction when you told me about the tragedy in Corinth?

Glaucon: [renewed outrage] That's *completely* different.

Socrates: Really? Please help me understand how.

Glaucon: Well, we're talking about innocent... [fumbling] What I mean is, it just hap... [dumb-founded]

Socrates: You were going to remind me that the crime is fresh, and the victims were innocent. But you stopped short, because you realized that this is true every day.

Glaucon: [irritated] Yes.

Socrates: Did you think I should be upset simply because our community is temporarily fixated on this specific crime?

Glaucon: No, that would be pretty stupid.

Socrates: And shallow and disingenuous. So I ask you again: Why am I supposed to be distraught about the tragedy in Corinth?

Glaucon: [long pause] Because they victims were fellow Greeks!

Socrates: According to Pythagoras, three Greeks are murdered on an average day. The tragedy of Corinth therefore brings us to our daily average. Do you plan to be angry and miserable every day the number of Greeks murdered equals or exceeds the long-run average?

Glaucon: You're missing the point. The Corinthians were murdered by a treacherous Persian!

Socrates: Ah, I overlooked that critical distinction. So what should outrage us is not murder in general, or murder of Greeks by fellow Greeks, but only murder of Greeks by Persians?

Glaucon: [touchy] Do you think it's *funny* when a Persian maniac butchers a child with his scimitar?

Socrates: Not in the slightest. But how is that worse than when a Greek maniac murders a child?

Glaucon: Well, maybe it's not worse. But we can *do something* about the Persian maniacs.

Socrates: We can "do something" about murderers of any nationality, can we not?

Glaucon: [exasperated] Sure. But we can do a lot more about the Persians.

Socrates: Are would-be Persian murderers more easily deterred by punishment?

Glaucon: Probably less, actually.

Socrates: Then what do you mean when you say we can "do a lot more about them"?

Glaucon: Well, if there weren't any Persians here, they wouldn't be able to murder any of us.

Socrates: True enough. So to end Persian murder, we should murder every Persian in Greece?

Glaucon: That's barbarous! No, we should just keep Persians *out* of Greece.

Socrates: We should exile a vast group for the crimes of a few?

Glaucon: I don't know why you call it "exile." The Persians can stay in Persia.

Socrates: What about Spartans? They're only 10% of the population of Greece, but they commit half the murders.

Glaucon: So?

Socrates: If the Persians should stay in Persia, should the Spartans stay in Sparta?

Glaucon: What a horrible thing to say! *Spartans are fellow Greeks!*

Socrates: So we shouldn't exile all Spartans for the crimes of a few Spartans?

Glaucon: Absolutely not.

Socrates: But are not the Persians fellow human beings?

Glaucon: I suppose.

Socrates: Why then isn't it just as horrible to advocate collective punishment against Persians as against Spartans?¹

Glaucon: What part of "Spartans are fellow Greeks" don't you understand?

Socrates: These Spartans seem rather troublesome. Could we just *declare* they're not Greek anymore, then exile them?

Glaucon: That would be a monstrous injustice.

Socrates: Indeed it would be. But the reason is not that they're fellow Greeks. Who counts as "Greek" is a matter of convention, not justice.

Glaucon: Then why would it be a monstrous injustice?

Socrates: Because Spartans, like Persians, are fellow human beings deserving of just treatment. And that, my dear Glaucon, is no convention.

July 18, 2017

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Collective Guilt: A Socratic Dialogue.” *EconLog*, February 13, 2013.

Patria, Parenti, Amici

Patria, parenti, amici,
Voi dunque non avete?
Country, family, friends,
Possess you none of them?
-Giuseppe Verdi, *Rigoletto*

I'm a staunch opponent of nationalism.¹ But I'm also a family man.² Isn't there a direct contradiction between the two? If I refuse to show favoritism to my fellow Americans, how can I in good conscience buy Christmas presents for my children? You might argue that whether you favor your countrymen or your kin, you're neglecting far more deserving strangers.

There is one obvious difference between nationalism and familial favoritism. Familial favoritism is a deep and ineradicable part of the human psyche, thanks to many millions of years of evolution. Nationalism – and expansive tribal identities more generally – pretends to be equally fundamental, but it's largely cheap talk. People happily give tons of free stuff to their children. But you need coercion to make people surrender more than a pittance to their "fellow citizens." To ask people to stop favoring their own children goes utterly against human nature. To ask

people to stop favoring their countrymen is a modest, eminently do-able request.

There is however a less obvious, but far more important difference between nationalism and familial favoritism: Despite its mighty evolutionary basis, almost everyone recognizes *moral strictures against familial favoritism*. Almost everyone knows that “It would help my son” is *not* a good reason to commit murder, break someone’s arm, or steal. Indeed, almost everyone knows that “It would help my son” is not a good reason for even petty offenses – like judging a Tae Kwon Do tournament unfairly because your son’s a contestant.

Nationalism, in contrast, is widely seen as an acceptable excuse for horrific crimes against outgroups. Do you plan to murder hundreds of thousands of innocent foreign civilians?³ Just say, “It will save American [German/Japanese/Russian/whatever] lives” – and other members of your tribe will nod their heads. Do you want to deprive millions of foreigners of the basic human rights to sell their labor to willing buyers, rent apartments from willing landlords, and buy groceries from willing merchants?⁴ Just say, “It’s necessary to protect American jobs” in a self-righteous tone, then bask in the admiration of your fellow citizens.

The surprising lesson: familial favoritism isn’t just inevitable; it’s basically benign. People know that this fundamental emotion is no excuse for ignoring the rights of strangers. Nationalism, in contrast, is at once phony and dangerous. Phony, because nationalists’ behavior belies their grandiose claims of loyalty and devotion to their countrymen. Dangerous, because when people remember their nation, they forget their basic moral obligations to leave strangers alone.

December 25, 2011

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “All You Ever Needed to Know About Nationalism, But Were Afraid to Ask.” *EconLog*, December 7, 2008.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Twin Lessons: Have More Kids. Pay Less Attention to Them.” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 11, 2011.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “The Common-Sense Case for Pacifism.” *EconLog*, April 5, 2010.
4. Caplan, Bryan. “Are Low-Skilled Americans the Master Race?” *EconLog*, March 28, 2006.
5. Caplan, Bryan. “What We Owe Immigrants.” *EconLog*, July 5, 2006.

SDB and Me: An Autobiographical Exploration

Now here's the story of how Social Desirability Bias has haunted my life.¹

The two earliest centers of Social Desirability Bias in my life were Beckford Elementary and Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic church. In school, they told us an endless stream of absurdities — things like, “We’re all going to be great at X!,” “We all take great pride in our school!,” “No one works harder than our teachers,” and so on. I don’t think it bothered me at first. But even in kindergarten, I couldn’t help but notice that not everyone was great at everything. By the time I was in third grade, I knew there were plenty of students who didn’t take pride in the school, and knew of several notoriously lazy teachers.

In catechism, similarly, our Catholic instructors talked a lot about how “We all love each other” even though standard cruel childhood behavior was much in evidence. I noticed the disconnect almost immediately. Once I had my first communion in third grade, I attended weekly Sunday mass, and heard the priests talk at length about “Devoting our lives wholly to God,” “Loving everyone,” “Turning the other cheek,” and “Taking everything you own and giving it to the poor.” Normally, of course, the priests were exhorting us to repent and heed this advice, but they never

pointed out that zero parishioners — themselves included — literally complied with any of these exhortations.

As I grew older, I became ever more cynical about school and church. Nobel Junior High School was full of apathetic students, with a noticeable presence of stoners (or at least stoner-wannabees). But the teachers and administrators talked as if we were all eagerly learning together. The P.E. teachers were a notable exception; they openly sneered at the trouble-makers who refused to dress for gym, and freely berated poor athletes like myself — not just for lack of effort, but lack of talent as well. Church, similarly, was agonizingly boring; even now, Morrissey’s “Everyday is Like Sunday” resonates with me. And I obviously wasn’t alone; sitting in the pews, I saw bored children and adults in all directions. But everyone from the priest to my mom spoke as if we were all sharing spiritual ecstasy. And no one acknowledged the cavernous gap between the Sermon on the Mount and the behavior of every person we knew.

By high school, I was loudly and aggressively pointing out the sugar-coated lies of educational and religious authorities. If the principal droned, “I am sure that all Highlanders will try their very best on this week’s standardized exams” over the P.A., I couldn’t wait to sneer, “And *I’m* sure that the vast majority of Highlanders will barely try at all!” If the priest sanctimoniously announced, “In this coming week we will devote our thoughts entirely to Christ,” I couldn’t wait to scoff to my mom, “More like devote our thoughts entirely to watching t.v.” My friends tended to find my remarks amusing but repetitive. My mom didn’t like them one bit, but she didn’t punish me as long as I sullenly accompanied her to church. By now, I called myself a “cynic.”

At the time, I was an aspiring English professor, or possibly novelist. While fantasy was my go-to genre, I also loved literature that candidly described the world as it really was, instead of sugarcoating. Works like *Huckleberry Finn* and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* come to mind. It was only in 11th-grade, however, that I heard of authors who were... gasp... atheists. And the name I kept hearing whispered was... Friedrich Nietzsche. At the library, I discovered a dog-eared yet strangely beautiful edition of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*; this very translation, if I'm not mistaken.²

Zarathustra was a revelation. On so many topics, Nietzsche poetically scoffed at crowd-pleasing nonsense. I loved it — and antagonized friends and family by incessantly quoting it. A century earlier, Nietzsche had declared war on SDB, without knowing the name. When he said, “I love the great despisers, because they are the great adorers, and arrows of longing for the other shore,” I gushed, “He’s talking about me!”

Nietzsche on religion:

“On mine honour, my friend,” answered Zarathustra, “there is nothing of all that whereof thou speakest: there is no devil and no hell. Thy soul will be dead even sooner than thy body: fear, therefore, nothing any more!”

Nietzsche on democracy:

A state? What is that? Well! open now your ears unto me, for now will I say unto you my word concerning the death of peoples.

A state, is called the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly lieth it also; and this lie creepeth from its mouth: “I, the state, am the people.”

Nietzsche on government generally:

But the state lieth in all languages of good and evil; and whatever it saith it lieth; and whatever it hath it hath stolen.

Nietzsche on his own followers:

Ye venerate me; but what if your veneration should some day collapse? Take heed lest a statue crush you!

Ye say, ye believe in Zarathustra? But of what account is Zarathustra! Ye are my believers: but of what account are all believers!

Ye had not yet sought yourselves: then did ye find me. So do all believers; therefore all belief is of so little account.

In hindsight, I freely admit, Nietzsche was also playing fast and loose with the truth. To call him a “philosopher” is a misnomer; he barely offered arguments and made minimal effort to anticipate or respond to thoughtful criticism. Nietzsche was a great poet, but a poet nonetheless. Still, his odes against SDB spoke to me; a brilliant, famous man saw the same disconnect between popular platitudes and harsh reality that I did.³

Later that year, I was excited to hear about another atheist author who had only died a few years earlier. Her name was Ayn Rand, and the first piece of hers I ever read was Francisco d’Anconia’s speech on money. It started off with a critique of Christian ethics:

“So you think that money is the root of all evil?” said Francisco d’Anconia. “Have you ever asked what is the root of money?

Money is a tool of exchange, which can't exist unless there are goods produced and men able to produce them. Money is the material shape of the principle that men who wish to deal with one another must deal by trade and give value for value. Money is not the tool of the moochers, who claim your product by tears, or of the looters, who take it from you by force. Money is made possible only by the men who produce. Is this what you consider evil?

[...]

“Or did you say it’s the love of money that’s the root of all evil? To love a thing is to know and love its nature. To love money is to know and love the fact that money is the creation of the best power within you, and your passkey to trade your effort for the effort of the best among men. It’s the person who would sell his soul for a nickel, who is loudest in proclaiming his hatred of money — and he has good reason to hate it. The lovers of money are willing to work for it. They know they are able to deserve it.”

At root, though, d’Anconia’s speech is a flamboyant attack on Social Desirability Bias itself. The self-appointed champions of the down-trodden are power-hungry would-be tyrants.⁴

“Run for your life from any man who tells you that money is evil. That sentence is the leper’s bell of an approaching looter. So long as men live together on earth and need means to deal with one another — their only substitute, if they abandon money, is the muzzle of a gun.”

My teachers' heroes were left-wing politicians like FDR. My priests' heroes were Christian zealots like St. Paul. Rand rolled her eye at both — and said that her heroes were *businesspeople*.

“To the glory of mankind, there was, for the first and only time in history, a country of money — and I have no higher, more reverent tribute to pay to America, for this means: a country of reason, justice, freedom, production, achievement. For the first time, man’s mind and money were set free, and there were no fortunes-by-conquest, but only fortunes-by-work, and instead of swordsmen and slaves, there appeared the real maker of wealth, the greatest worker, the highest type of human being — the self-made man — the American industrialist.

Within a year, I read almost every word she wrote. Nietzsche was long-forgotten. Rand defied SDB on virtually every issue — and I loved her for it. My lingering worry was that she was economically confused. Could laissez-faire capitalism actually work in practice?

To resolve these doubts, I started studying economics. I began with the Rand-approved Austrians, then moved on to mainstream neoclassical economics and behavioral economics.⁵ And within each of these intellectual traditions, I discovered novel defiance of Social Desirability Bias.

Austrians broadly shared Rand’s commitment to laissez-faire capitalism. Mainstream economics, in contrast, helped me see many of Rand’s inadequacies and errors. But carefully interpreted, even left-wing interpretations of mainstream economic theory damn the status quo as a parade of counter-productive and grossly suboptimal policies. Neoclassical

economics' slogan that "Actions speak louder than words" is an intellectual vaccine against SDB. And while social scientists often use behavioral economics to intellectually retrofit standard SDB rationales for government intervention, you can easily use the same framework to criticize government intervention itself.⁶ And of course public choice theory, which imputes properly cynical motivations to politicians, is another sharp stake in the heart of SDB. That's right, you can't trust politicians to use power for the good of society; instead, you can count on politicians to use power to get more power.

What public choice failed to say loudly and clearly is that voters' SDB is the *key* ingredient that makes democracy so inefficient. SDB drives a wedge between public policy and ugly truths about trade-offs and incentives. SDB is what makes people prefer evil controlling politicians to pragmatic live-and-let-live businesspeople. This is basically what I said in my first book, *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*, though I was still unfamiliar with the psych research and terminology of SDB. With 20/20 hindsight, however, I can say that *all* of my books revolve around the rejection of specific expressions of SDB — as well as the whole underlying mentality.

Take my second book, *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids*. While twin and adoption research affirms the power of heredity over upbringing, that doesn't sound good. Neither does economic reasoning about the relationship between parental effort and optimal family size. SDB says nonsense like, "Kids can do anything they set their minds to!" and "Just follow your heart."

The Case Against Education, published in 2018, was my first book to explicitly use SDB to explain the global dominance of education subsidies

and the intellectual dominance of the human capital model. Writing it brought me back to elementary school, when I first noticed the chasm between official school rhetoric and actual school experience. Teachers, parents, and politicians all speak as if kids are learning useful skills from dawn to dusk. The actual evidence, in contrast, confirms that education is mostly signaling. As I often say, education is not so much job training as a passport to the *real* job training, which happens on the job.

My last book, *Open Borders*, challenges SDB more directly. Most pro-immigration “arguments” focus on emotionally-charged vignettes about particular immigrants. Instead of actually responding to criticism about the broader social effects of immigration, they offer bittersweet biographies of immigrants. I have nothing against such biographies, but what do they really show about optimal immigration policy? Next to nothing. *Open Borders*, in contrast, focuses almost entirely on arguments.

While writing these books, I’ve also been raising four kids. And I’m proud to say that I’ve successfully raised them without SDB. When my kids ask me questions, however uncomfortable, I either tell them the unvarnished truth or shrug, “I’ll tell you when you’re older.” I love without lies, and as a result, my kids trust me and distrust society. As well they should.

March 17, 2021

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Write Your SDB Autobiography.” *EconLog*, March 15, 2021.

2. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spake Zarathustra, A Book for All and None*. Translated by Thomas Common, *The Project Gutenberg*, 1999.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “My Book List.” *EconLog*, March 18, 2010.
4. Caplan, Bryan. “Power-Hunger.” *EconLog*, March 2, 2017.
5. Caplan, Bryan. “Market Failure Theory as Reproach to Government Practice.” *EconLog*, January 14, 2019.
6. Caplan, Bryan. “Demagoguery Explained.” *EconLog*, May 3, 2014.

IQ With Conscience

I'm an IQ realist, all the way. IQ tests aren't perfect, but they're an excellent proxy for what ordinary language calls "intelligence." A massive body of research confirms that IQ predicts not just educational success, but career success. Contrary to critics, IQ tests are not culturally biased; they fairly measure genuine group differences in intelligence.¹

Yet I've got to admit: My fellow IQ realists are, on average, a scary bunch. People who vocally defend the power of IQ are *vastly* more likely than normal people to advocate extreme human rights violations. I've heard IQ realists advocate a One-Child Policy for people with low IQs. I've heard IQ realists advocate a No-Child Policy for people with low IQs. I've heard IQ realists advocate forced sterilization for people with low IQs. I've heard IQ realists advocate forcible exile of people with low IQs – fellow citizens, not just immigrants. I've heard IQ realists advocate murdering people with low IQs.

When I say, "I've heard..." I'm not just talking about stuff I've read on the Internet. I'm talking about what IQ realists have told me to my face. In my experience, if a stranger brings up low IQ in Africa, there's about a 50/50 chance he casually transitions to forced sterilization or mass murder of hundreds of millions of human beings as an intriguing response. You can

protest that they're just trolling, but these folks seemed frighteningly sincere to me.²

Don't such policies flow logically from IQ realism? No way. If someone says, "I'm more intelligent than other people, so it's acceptable for me to murder them," the sensible response isn't, "Intelligence is a myth." The sensible response is, "Are you mad? That doesn't justify murder." Advocating brutality in the name of your superior intellect is the mark of a super-villain, not a logician.

But don't low-IQ people produce negative externalities – negative externalities that well-intentioned consequentialists will want to address? I'm no consequentialist, but the consistent consequentialist position is: Not if the "solution" is worse than the problem! And if your "solution" involves gross human rights violations, there's every reason to think it *is* worse than the problem. We should be especially wary of self-styled consequentialists who rush toward maximal brutality instead of patiently searching for cheap, humane ways to cope with the social costs of low IQ.

Why do IQ realists go so wrong? Stigma is part of the story: If IQ realists face grave social disapproval, sensible IQ realists will tend to keep their views quiet. Remaining spokesmen for IQ realism therefore lean crazy. But stigma aside, IQ realists tend to be smart – and self-consciously smart people are often attracted to what I call high-IQ misanthropy.³ If you marinate in your own misanthropy long enough, common decency fades away.

To repeat, I'm an IQ realist myself. As a result, I'm tempted to deny ugly generalizations about my tribe. But I won't. As I've said before:

If you really want to improve your group's image, telling other groups to stop stereotyping won't work. The stereotype is based on the underlying distribution of fact. It is far more realistic to turn your complaining inward, and pressure the bad apples in your group to stop pulling down the average.⁴

So here's what I say to every IQ realist who forgets common decency: You embarrass me. You embarrass yourself. You embarrass intelligence itself. Teaching IQ with conscience probably won't end the stigma against the science of intelligence. But if we teach IQ *without* conscience, we deserve that stigma.

April 18, 2017

Notes

1. Brown, Robert, Cecil Reynolds, and Jean Whitaker. "Bias in Mental Testing Since *Bias in Mental Testing*." *School Psychology Quarterly*, 1999.
2. Caplan, Bryan. "Against Trolling." *EconLog*, April 20, 2016.
3. Caplan, Bryan. "Against High-IQ Misanthropy." *EconLog*, September 15, 2010.
4. Caplan, Bryan. "Crashing Into Stereotypes." *EconLog*, September 22, 2005.

Against High-IQ Misanthropy

Out of all the reactions I've heard to *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids*, the most disturbing are all variations on "Except stupid people. They shouldn't have kids." I could snark, "You mean people like you?," but that would be dishonest. The latter-day proponents of negative eugenics have reasonably high IQs. But their misanthropy is still morally and economically mistaken.

Morally, I just have to ask the high-IQ misanthrope, "What did stupid people ever do to you?" Their complaints are pretty petty: The dumb kids asked annoying questions in class, made fun of your *Star Trek* costume, etc. Are these injuries even remotely awful enough to outweigh the fact that a human being gets to exist and enjoy life? In any case, once you reach adulthood, people of all IQs generally leave you alone if you leave them alone. If you want to give your kids a better childhood than you had, use your brains to make some extra money and move to a nicer neighborhood.

Economically, the high-IQ misanthrope has an even weaker case. Smart people may excel in all activities, but as the law of comparative advantage reveals, everyone's better off if people with high IQs outsource their less challenging tasks to others. In a society of Einsteins, Einsteins take out the garbage, scrub floors, and wash dishes. What a mind-numbing waste of talent!

Yes, a handful of people have IQs so low their marginal product is negative. But the vast majority of low-IQ people pull their weight. In a market economy, being less productive than average doesn't make you a parasite. If you produce less, you earn less – simple as that.

Bottom line: When stupid people have kids, high-IQ people should be happy for them. Being smart is better than being stupid, but being stupid and alive is far better than not existing at all.

September 15, 2010

How Bad is White Nationalism?

White nationalism is one of the most reviled ideologies on earth. But what exactly is so awful about it? Menachem Rosensaft's piece in *Slate* quotes some leading white nationalists, but never really explains why this nationalism is worse than all other nationalisms.¹

As you'd expect, white nationalists dominate Rosensaft's comments. Several point out that he's a staunch Zionist, and quip, "Nationalism for me but not for thee." I'm a staunch anti-nationalist, so I'm tempted agree with this critique but "level down" – to embrace the view that every form of nationalism is just as bad as white nationalism.

What's so bad about nationalism in general? Perverse moral priorities. Human beings are naturally biased in favor of the groups they identify with; psychologists call this "in-group bias." Once you recognize this human failing, your moral priority should be bending over backwards to treat out-groups justly. No nationalism I've ever heard of even tries to do so.* Instead, nationalisms *embrace* in-group bias – shouting and shoving to maximize their side's share of wealth, power, and especially status.** A brief exchange in *The Painted Veil* aptly boils down the iniquity of nationalist thinking:

Businessman: What about support from Chiang Kai-shek? Where does he stand on this?

Townsend: He's a nationalist. He will stand on the side of the Chinese. That's why they call themselves "nationalists."²

On reflection, though, I should resist the intellectual temptation to equate all nationalisms. Nothing in my critique rules out moral distinctions between them. So how does white nationalism measure up on the most obvious metrics?

1. *Historical track record.* Even if you only count Nazism and European colonialism, white nationalism has a massive body count. But several non-European nationalisms – especially Chinese and Japanese – are in the same bloody ballpark.

2. *Expected track record.* Given white nationalism's ongoing half century of pariah status, it seems unlikely to do much damage in the foreseeable future. For the time being, white nationalism looks about as dangerous as Luxembourgian nationalism.

3. *Expected track record conditional on popularity.* Even without white nationalism to urge them on, First World governments continue to kill large numbers of innocent people in the Third World to prevent statistically trivial harms.³ If white nationalism were an influential doctrine, it is reasonable to expect far worse treatment of Third World innocents. After all, white-majority countries still have greater military power than all other countries combined. Furthermore, since they have relatively prosperous economies, they could easily make their military dominance even more lopsided. While there's a chance this could ultimately supplant even worse non-white tyrannies, the "transitional period" would be hell on earth. By this standard, non-white nationalism poses a considerably smaller – though still potentially apocalyptic – threat.

4. *The viciousness of the advocates.* Being unpopular doesn't make a moral theory more or less evil. But as I've argued before, we should expect people who support evil views *despite* unpopularity to be especially morally vicious.⁴ This prediction seems to fit the facts well. The average white nationalist really is angry and hateful. Indeed, it is very hard to locate white nationalists who are even civil to people who disagree with them. (Feel free to prove me wrong in the comments... or right, as the case may be). Reliable statistics on contemporary white nationalist violence are hard to find, but if you divide white nationalists' most visible crimes by their tiny population, their per-capita violent crime rate looks very high indeed.

So how bad is white nationalism? Back when white nationalism was popular, its sins were massive but hardly unique. The doctrine currently does little harm because it's so rare. If however white nationalism regained popularity, it would be a cataclysmic disaster because white-majority countries have the firepower to wreak the havoc other nationalist movements can only fantasize about. Finally, white nationalists score as badly as you would expect in terms of moral character. Intellectually, their nationalism is no worse than hundreds of other nationalisms; but the kind of people willing to embrace white nationalism despite the stigma against it really do tend to be hateful, if not violent.

* If you've got a solid counter-example of a self-styled "nationalist" movement whose top priority is (or was) treating out-groups justly, please share in the comments.

** Doesn't this critique condemn the family as well? It would, if people thought it morally praiseworthy to treat outsiders unjustly to benefit their families. Fortunately, few parents consider it morally praiseworthy for their kids to bully, cheat, and rob non-relatives. Most of us recognize that we should strive to treat non-family members justly precisely *because* familial love tempts us to do otherwise.⁵

December 30, 2013

Notes

1. Rosensaft, Menachem. "White Nationalism: A Scourge That Won't Go Away." *HuffPost*, May 12, 2012.
2. Caplan, Bryan. "All You Ever Needed to Know About Nationalism, but Were Afraid to Ask." *EconLog*, December 7, 2008.
3. Caplan, Bryan. "Viscusi on Risk Analysis of Terrorism: A Strange Agnosticism." *EconLog*, August 20, 2007.
4. Caplan, Bryan. "You Will Know Them By Their Unpopular Views." *EconLog*, May 15, 2013.
5. Caplan, Bryan. "Patria, Parenti, Amici." *EconLog*, December 25, 2011.

The Libertarian Target

Libertarianism has a wealth of prominent, persistent opponents, starting with Paul Krugman and *Salon*.¹ Who precisely are they criticizing? Probably not the 9-14% of Americans who are economically conservative but socially liberal. No, the critics target *self-conscious* libertarians – people who are, at minimum, in the same philosophical ballpark as Milton Friedman.

The self-conscious libertarian population is, to belabor the obvious, extremely small and politically unsuccessful. Serious libertarianism is so rare that very few surveys of political identity even bother to include a libertarian response option. There isn't a single 20th-century president or any ruling governor in the same philosophical ballpark as Milton Friedman. Certainly no more than five current members of Congress qualify. Probably none.

The puzzle: Why do high-profile thinkers keep energetically targeting such a marginalized viewpoint? As a self-conscious libertarian, I'm definitely not complaining. I welcome all the publicity, no matter how negative.² But the publicity remains peculiar. What motivates the critics to attack libertarianism time after time? Top possibilities the critics might embrace:

1. Despite their rarity and absence on the front lines of politics, self-conscious libertarians still strongly shape mainstream conservative politicians' economic policies.

2. Self-conscious libertarians, though rare, have still managed to sharply shift public opinion in a libertarian direction.

3. Self-conscious libertarians, though politically impotent, are a *symbol* of what's wrong with American politics.

And then there are the stories the critics won't embrace, but perhaps they're true nonetheless...

4. Libertarians, unlike mainstream conservatives, openly defend many unpopular views. Intellectuals who want to loudly champion popular views *have* to engage libertarians because there's hardly anyone else to argue with.

5. Libertarian arguments, though mistaken, are consistently clever enough to get under the critics' skin. The purpose of the criticism is not shielding the world from bad ideas but giving the critics some intellectual catharsis.

6. Libertarian arguments are good enough to weigh on the critics' intellectual consciences. They attack libertarians to convince *themselves* that we're wrong. And they keep attacking us because they keep failing to fully convince themselves.

Other stories?

April 13, 2015

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Krugman versus the Audit Heuristic.” *EconLog*, April 10, 2015; “Search: Libertarians.” *Salon*.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Me, Gilens, and Salon.” *EconLog*, May 11, 2014.

The Prevalence of Marxism in Academia

As the Iron Curtain crumbled, people often joked, “Marxism is dead everywhere – except American universities.” The stereotype of the Marxist professor runs deep. But is this stereotype grounded in statistical fact? Here are the results from a 2006 nationally representative survey of American professors.¹ The survey asked if the professor considered himself “radical,” “political activist,” or “Marxist.” Survey says:

	Radical	Activist	Marxist
Phys/Bio sciences	6.3	2.6	0
Social sciences	24	20.6	17.6
Humanities	19	26.2	5
Comp sci/engineering	2	0.6	0.7
Health sciences	0	1.2	0
Business	5.3	3.2	1.9
Other	7.2	11.1	1.1
Total	11.2	13.5	3

Overall, Marxism is a tiny minority faith. Just 3% of professors accept the label. The share rises to 5% in the humanities. The shocker, though, is that

as recently as 2006, about 18% of social scientists self-identified as Marxists.

Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, the authors of the study, hasten to say, “Move along, nothing to see here.”

[S]elf-identified Marxists are rare in academe today. The highest proportion of Marxist academics can be found in the social sciences, and there they represent less than 18 percent of all professors (among the social science fields for which we can issue discipline-specific estimates, sociology contains the most Marxists, at 25.5 percent).

In contrast, I urge you to rubberneck. If 18% of biologists believed in creationism, that would be a big deal. Why? Because creationism is nonsense. Similarly, if 18% of social scientists believe in Marxism, that too is a big deal. Why? Because Marxism is nonsense. Furthermore, if 18% of a discipline fully embraces a body of nonsense, there is also probably a large bloc of nonsense *sympathizers* – people who won’t swallow the nonsense whole, but nevertheless see great value in it. Suppose, plausibly, that there is one fellow traveler for every true believer. That would bring the share of abject intellectual corruption to fully 35% – and 51% in sociology.

I suspect that Marxists’ share has fallen since 2006. But it makes me wonder: When precisely did American academia hit “peak Marxism” – and how high was the peak?

March 31, 2015

Notes

1. Gross, Neil, and Solon Simmons. “The Social and Political Views of American Professors.” *Working Paper Presented at a Harvard University Symposium on Professors and Their Politics*, 2007.

Redeeming Tenure

Tenure is terrible. Well, it's awesome for those of us who have it. The tenure system, however, is nonsense on stilts. Economists' rationalizations for tenure are flimsy indeed.¹ Just consider: Virtually all semi-prestigious professors have tenure, yet virtually *no one* in the for-profit sector has anything close. I know, we can construct fanciful scenarios where this chasm makes sublime economic sense, such as: "Professors are willing to sacrifice vastly more in salary than normal humans to eliminate the last vestiges of job insecurity" plus "Giving professors enormous job security has far less effect on their productivity than it would on normal humans." But neither claim is remotely plausible. *Lots* of non-professors intensely value job security, and *lots* of professors heavily slack off once they get tenure.

Still, no individual professor is responsible for this corrupt system. And it's hardly reasonable (or even useful) for an individual professor to renounce his tenure, whatever that might mean. It is reasonable, however, to ask: "How can my tenure be redeemed?"

The obvious starting point is: Don't shortchange your students merely because you have tenure. Take pride in your teaching. Strive to edify and inspire even though the career rewards are trivial.

Next: Produce excellent research even though you totally don't have to. Take pride in your contributions to human knowledge. Push yourself on both quantity and quality.

When you ponder these norms, however, they're more rigorous than they look.

Suppose you're teaching labor economics. Can you "strive to edify and inspire" if you gloss over intensely controversial subjects like the economics of discrimination? Absolutely not. You can't take pride in your teaching while muttering, "Students can't handle the truth." The forthright yet friendly exploration of vital yet sensitive topics is part and parcel of great teaching.² And while untenured teachers can plausibly protest, "I've got to think about my family's security," those of us with tenure *know* where our next paycheck is coming from. While there's a small chance the administration hassles you, that's a minor cost in the broad scheme of things. If tenured professors won't voice awkward truths, who will?

Much the same holds for research. Slightly extending human knowledge on a topic no one cares about is rarely a worthwhile intellectual contribution. In a world of anxious conformists, most of the best research opportunities are mired in controversy – especially in the humanities and social sciences. If you want to create research that really matters, you should boldly proceed. Tenure takes care of your family, but who will put food on the table of ugly truths? Most of the time, the answer is: You or no one.

So make it you.

If you use your tenure to teach and research with integrity, you're well above the bar. Yet if you're earnest about redeeming tenure, you should also deploy it to defend the integrity of teaching and research *in general*.

Untenured faculty can forgivably keep their mouths shut and their heads down. Those of us with tenure, however, are the obvious candidates to “give back”: To champion the rights of faculty and students to explore controversial ideas without fear. And bear in mind: for we professors, the only “controversial ideas” worthy of the name are ideas that are controversial *on university campuses*. Noam Chomsky may be more controversial than Milton Friedman in the broader world, but in academia almost no one needs to look over their shoulder before praising Chomsky.

Admittedly, the duty to stand up for the right to explore controversial ideas without fear is an imperfect duty; no one has time to stand up for everyone. Nevertheless, you have ample time to at least stand up for your own friends, your own colleagues, and your own students. Some anti-intellectual university functionary might get mad at you for doing so. If even a dream job for life doesn’t give you a backbone, though, what will?

October 29, 2020

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Tenure and Non-Profits.” *EconLog*, March 9, 2007; Caplan, Bryan. “Two Cowenian Tenure Claims.” *EconLog*, March 11, 2007.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “*How to Win Friends and Influence People?* Book Club Round-Up.” *EconLog*, April 28, 2020.

I Dream of Repentance

Since the election, several people have privately asked me, “Well, whatever you think about Trump, don’t you at least *enjoy* the attendant outrage of the left? At least *that* must make you happy, right?”

In my misanthropic youth, the answer would have been a resounding yes. But in all honesty, I put away such childishness years ago. I have a rich, full life that affords me ample opportunities for pure joy. I have no need to seek out joy sullied by anger. And again in all honesty, I wish everyone else felt as I do. Living through this disgraceful election, and then seeing partisan pundits double down on their disgraceful behavior afterwards, just discourages me.¹ This is *especially* true when I’m sympathetic to the conclusions of practitioners of the disgraceful behavior. Reasonable, fair-minded disagreement gives me hope; unreasonable, unfair agreement just creeps me out.

What about the unreasonable and unfair? Don’t I want to see *them* choke on their own rage? Not at all. To give me pleasure, they would have to display a far rarer reaction: heart-felt repentance. All of the following would be music to my ears:

1. “Forgive me, for I have allowed my emotions to cloud my judgment.² From now on, I’ll strive to be calm when I analyze politics.”

2. “Forgive me, for I have apologized for dishonesty, demagoguery, and half-truths. From now on, I’ll prize truth over political victory.”

3. “Forgive me, for I have trolled, stating arguments I know to be flawed in order to aggravate others. From now on, nobility comes first.”

4. “Forgive me, for I have advocated collective punishment of groups I dislike, even though I know most members of these groups are innocent. From now on, I will make a special effort to treat members of groups I dislike justly.”

5. “Forgive me, for I have advocated government coercion, even though it’s far from clear that leaving people alone would lead to worse results. From now on, I embrace the *presumption of liberty*.”

If any of these *mea culpas* come my way, I’ll be delighted and grateful – and never say, “I told you so.” But if repentance remains rare – as I firmly expect – I won’t let it get me down. Any observant person who turns to politics for happiness is doomed to dismay. I have my Bubble, and it is enough.³

December 26, 2016

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Myth of the Rational Voter 2016.” *EconLog*, March 1, 2016; Caplan, Bryan. “The Silent Suffering of the Non-Neurotic.” *EconLog*, November 15, 2016.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Kahan and the Politically Motivated Reasoning Paradigm.” *EconLog*, December 12, 2016.

3. Caplan, Bryan. "Make Your Own Bubble in 10 Easy Steps." *EconLog*, April 11, 2013.

The Apologies of Repeal

Whenever government repeals a bad policy, my first reaction is amazement.

Then gratitude.

Swiftly followed by indignation, because no matter how bad the repealed policy was, the government almost never apologizes.

Homely example: The FAA used to ban the use of any electronic device during takeoff and landing. When the rule finally went away, I was amazed, because I expected to endure this petty tyranny for all the flights of my life. Next, I felt grateful for this small expansion of my freedom. Soon, however, I became indignant, because the government never apologized. A half-hearted, “Sorry that our paranoia inconvenienced people billions of times” would have gone a long way.

The same holds for the COVID crusade.² Almost all vaccines sharply reduce contagion.³ Yet for months, the government kept forcing vaccinated individuals to wear masks and socially distance. When the CDC finally changed its guidelines, I was amazed. Then grateful. Yet before long – and to this day – indignant. A half-hearted, “Sorry that our paranoia trampled the freedom of hundreds of millions” would have gone a long way.

A clever public choice economist might respond, “Getting government to repeal bad policies is nigh-impossible already. If leaders have to

apologize when they repeal, repeals will virtually vanish.” Plausible, but you could also say, “If governments know they’ll have to apologize when they repeal bad policies, maybe they’ll be more cautious about adopting bad policies in the first place.” It’s the same as the logic of war crimes trials:

One common objection to the Nuremberg trials was that they gave bad incentives to future war criminals. If war criminals know they’ll be tried and executed if they lose, self-interest urges them to fight to the bitter end. From this perspective, the trials were short-sighted. They satisfied the impulse for revenge, but extended the duration of future wars.

On reflection, however, that’s only a medium-run view. The apostle of credibility could easily retort, “Yes, the Nuremberg trials encourage future war criminals to fight to the bitter end. But they also discourage future leaders from committing war crimes in the first place. We should take a truly long-run view.”⁴

But how abject of an apology does the public deserve anyway? It depends. If the government justified a bad policy with hyperbole, willfully overstating the probability and severity of bad outcomes, then we deserve a giant blubbering apology. At minimum.

In contrast, if the government justified a bad policy with agnosticism, admitting that the probability of severely bad outcomes was low, then even I’ll settle for a low-key apology. Though as I’ve argued before, government minus hyperbolic rhetoric is practically impotent:

Why are proponents of government action so prone to hyperbole? Because it’s rhetorically effective, of course. You need wild claims

and flowery words to whip up public enthusiasm for government action. Sober weighing of probability, cost, and benefit damns with faint praise – and fails to overcome public apathy.⁵

Added bonus: When government explicitly admits that, “The probability of a severely bad outcome is low, but caution makes sense until we know more,” the natural response is to try to *swiftly* ascertain the truth. Mostly notable, if the world’s governments had responded to COVID with an earnest admission of ignorance, the impetus to apply the time-tested experimental method would have been far stronger. Voluntary Paid Human Experimentation wouldn’t merely have given us vaccines sooner; it would have allowed us to calmly cease a vast array of ineffective COVID precautions a year ago.⁶

I’d like to assert that, “History will not be kind to the enemies of Human Challenge Trials,” but that’s wishful thinking.⁷ History is written by the victors, and the victors of COVID are unapologetic innumerates. Though we deserve a massive apology, we’ll be lucky to walk away with the freedoms we took for granted back in 2019.

June 15, 2021

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Against Apology Perfectionism.” *EconLog*, January 12, 2021.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Crusades and You.” *EconLog*, May 19, 2021.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “Fear me Not! I Got My COVID Vaccine.” *EconLog*, March 29, 2021.

4. Caplan, Bryan. “War Crimes and the Long Run.” *EconLog*, August 15, 2017.
5. Caplan, Bryan. “What’s Libertarian About Betting?” *EconLog*, September 30, 2015.
6. Caplan, Bryan. “What We Would Now Know, If Demagogues Didn’t Rule Every Country on Earth.” *EconLog*, May 11, 2020.
7. Caplan, Bryan. “Ten Points on the Wrong Side of History.” *EconLog*, November 30, 2016.

Who Really Cares About the Poor?: A Socratic Dialogue

Glacon: Can you believe all these rich jerks who refuse to help the poor?

Socrates: I'm puzzled, Glaucon. You're rich, but I've never seen you help the poor.

Glaucon: I gave five gold pieces this year. But I'm not talking about charity, Socrates. I'm talking about last night's vote in the Assembly.

Socrates: Sorry, I didn't attend. What did I miss?

Glaucon: And you call yourself a philosopher! Fine, I'll tell you. The democratic faction – to which I happen to belong – proposed a new law to give ten gold pieces a year to every poor Athenian.

Socrates: From the public treasury?

Glaucon: Yes, from the public treasury. Anyway, we democrats called a vote – and the aristocratic faction voted us down. How can they be so uncaring?

Socrates: Why do you assume the aristocrats voted No because they were uncaring? Did they say, "I'm voting No because I don't care about the poor"?

Glaucon: Of course not. No one *admits* such things.

Socrates: So, what objections *did* the aristocrats voice?

Glaucon: Oh, the usual. They said our meager program would turn poor and rich alike into lazy bums. The poor wouldn't want to work if they got free money, and the rich wouldn't want to work if they had to pay the taxes required to fund the program.

Socrates: Sounds overstated. Divide by ten, and they're right. Any other argument?

Glaucon: Yes. Many also insisted that, "It's my money." They earned it, so they shouldn't have to share it.

Socrates: And they're wrong?

Glaucon: Of course they're wrong! We're a community, we all depend on each other and we're all obliged to take care of each other. If they had an ounce of compassion for disadvantaged Athenians, they would have voted Yes.

Socrates: Then I have good news for you.

Glaucon: Good news? What in Greece are you talking about?

Socrates: The good news is that you – and your fellow democrats – can still fulfill your obligations despite the aristocrats' resistance.

Glaucon: What, revolution?

Socrates: No. Just tell me this: What is your annual income?

Glaucon: A rude question, Socrates.

Socrates: Is it? If I recall, your poverty law would have required everyone to tell the Assembly their income.

Glaucon: I seem to recall you claimed ignorance of our proposal. Very well. I make 1000 gold pieces a year.

Socrates: Glad to know you're prospering. And what do you need to avoid hunger and homelessness?

Glaucon: I've got three kids, so 100 gold pieces a year.

Socrates: Seems high, but let's run with it. You make 1000 gold pieces a year, but only need 100. That leaves 900 gold pieces a year.

Glaucon: I can do arithmetic, Socrates.

Socrates: Most rich men can. Here then is my advice: Give your extra 900 gold pieces to the poor. Urge your fellow democrats to do the same.

Glaucon: Charity?! Your cure for Athenian poverty is to impoverish me? Surely you jest.

Socrates: I know you can't personally cure poverty, Glaucon. But you *can* save a dozen poor families from their plight. And when you're done, you'll still live comfortably.

Glaucon: Why should I?

Socrates: Unlike the aristocratic faction, you care about the poor, do you not?

Glaucon: Absolutely.

Socrates: If you have the means to help people you care about, shouldn't you help them?

Glaucon: Sure, if it would do any good.

Socrates: It seems like your 900 gold pieces would do a great deal of good.

Glaucon: Wouldn't cure poverty.

Socrates: Granted, but so what? Imagine a father has ten children, but only enough food to keep one alive. If he cares about his children, what will he do?

Glaucon: [sigh] Pick one child and give him the food.

Socrates: Indeed. If you truly care for the Athenian poor, you will heed his example.

Glaucon: My poverty law would have helped vastly more than I ever could.

Socrates: Perhaps. But your path remains clear. Give your extra 900 gold pieces to the poor. Then explain your reasons to your fellow caring democrats.

Glaucon: Why should we be singled out for suffering?

Socrates: If you're as caring as you say, you'll suffer more if you keep your money.

Glaucon: Funny, I hadn't noticed I was suffering.

Socrates: Could a caring father eat a feast while his children starved?

Glaucon: [sigh] No.

Socrates: Why not?

Glaucon: Because every bite would remind him that people he cares about need it more.

Socrates: Indeed. By the way, I don't mind if we continue this conversation tomorrow.

Glaucon: Do you have someplace to be?

Socrates: No, but I thought you might want to run home and donate the 900 gold pieces. It's hard to talk philosophy when desperate people you care about await your assistance.

Glaucon: If you're going to mock me, go join your aristocratic friends and mock us at the next Assembly.

Socrates: They're not my friends. Democrats and aristocrats alike sin against philosophy.

Glaucon: Look, why should the aristocrats get to free ride? They should contribute to solve the problem of poverty just like everyone else.

Socrates: If they're as uncaring as you say, how are they "free riding"?

Glaucon: Don't they benefit from the knowledge that every Athenian has a decent standard of living?

Socrates: Caring people like you benefit from such knowledge, no doubt. But your heartless aristocratic opponents will take small comfort from this realization.

Glaucon: They may be aristocrats, but they're still human.

Socrates: Hmm, that's the first kind word you've ever had for them, so far as I recall. I concur. Aristocrats, like democrats, are not bereft of compassion.

Glaucon: Many even give to charity.

Socrates: According to my friend in the Bureau of Athenian Economic Statistics, aristocrats actually give a higher share of their income than democrats.

Glaucon: Well then! So they do care and they are free riding after all!

Socrates: Perhaps. But now I'm more puzzled than ever.

Glaucon: What is it now?

Socrates: When an aristocrat gives 100 gold pieces to the poor, what does it cost him?

Glaucon: 100 gold pieces.

Socrates: Right. When an aristocrat votes for a measure that raises his taxes by 100 gold pieces, what does *that* cost him?

Glaucon: 100 gold pieces, again.

Socrates: Does it? Was last night's proposal decided by a single vote?

Glaucon: No, the final tally was 555 to 450.

Socrates: So if one aristocrat had switched his vote, the final tally would have been 554 to 451?

Glaucon: Correct.

Socrates: And your measure still would have lost?

Glaucon: We are a democracy, Socrates. So yes.

Socrates: Then it's hard to see how an aristocrat saved any money by voting against your measure. Whether he voted Yes or No, his taxes stayed the same.

Glaucon: Your point being?

Socrates: Your opponents didn't vote No because they were "uncaring," because any one of them could have switched his vote without paying one copper piece extra.

Glaucon: Maybe they voted No because they foresaw a tiny probability of tipping the election.

Socrates: Perhaps. But what about all the No voters who donate to charity? Why would someone willing to hand the poor money out of his own pocket be so eager to guard against a small chance of paying extra taxes to help them?

Glaucon: Don't make me guess. Just tell me.

Socrates: Very well. The simplest explanation is that the aristocrats sincerely believe the reasons they stated. They're worried about disincentives – and they think that whoever earned his money deserves to keep it.

Glaucon: Bah. If they're so wonderful, they'd happily donate all their surplus riches to the poor, right?

Socrates: I don't remember discussing whether anyone was "wonderful." But yes, if they deeply cared about the poor, they would give away all their extra income.

Glaucon: But almost no one does that.

Socrates: Then almost no one deeply cares about the poor.

Glaucon: So your point is that democrats and aristocrats are equally bad?

Socrates: A question for another day. But at least on the issue we're discussing, my point is that you democrats are worse.

Glaucon: Worse? How could we possibly be *worse* than them?

Socrates: They live up to their stated principles. You don't live up to yours.

Glaucon: [huffs]

Socrates: The aristocrats say that people who earned their money deserve to keep it. That's perfectly consistent with voting against last night's proposal. And it's perfectly consistent with their failure to give away all the income they don't need.

Glaucon: And we democrats?

Socrates: You say we're obliged to care for all our fellow Athenians. That's arguably consistent with the way your side voted last night – though you really should look more closely into those disincentive effects. But your principle is *inconsistent* with your failure to give away all the income you don't need.

Glaucon: Nobody's perfect.

Socrates: Indeed. But please remind me, how much did you actually give to charity this year?

Glaucon: Five gold pieces.

Socrates: Then your deviation from your stated principle is extreme. You should have given 900. You only did 5/900ths of your duty, leaving 895/900ths undone.

Glaucon: Funny, I don't feel like an awful person.

Socrates: I've never thought so. But if your moral principles are correct, an awful person is what you are.

Glaucon: Why do I keep arguing with you, Socrates? There's no need to be rude.

Socrates: I've tried to make my points with utmost civility. All I'm saying is this: Your principles and your behavior can't both be right. Change one, and I'll invite the aristocrat of your choice to my next dialogue.

And don't worry, I'll treat him with utmost civility.

August 17, 2015

When May We Be Happy?

2020 felt like a bad year. I was definitely less happy than normal. Yet every day, I *tried* to be happy.

You could question the realism of the goal. “Be happy during a pandemic? When over a million human beings are dying? When the global economy crashes? When billions lose their freedom? When immigration restrictions go from draconian to suffocating?¹ When police murder innocents in broad daylight? When fanatics riot in the streets? When friends lose their minds? When they lose touch with friendship itself? *Not possible.*”

A totally different reaction, however, is to question the *propriety* of the goal. You’re not *supposed* to be happy when the world is in tatters. Only a vicious person could be happy when fellow citizens are dying of the plague, when whole populations live under house arrest, when their friends are acting like Martians. Just because you *can* be happy in 2020 doesn’t mean you *should*.

Emotionally speaking, this is a powerful point. Logically speaking, however, the implications are absurd. Fellow citizens die every day. Without fail! When you hear that total 2020 mortality is 15% above normal for the U.S., this means that last year death claimed about 7 times as many

Americans as COVID took this year. The upshot: If you can't be happy now because your fellow citizens are dying, you can't be happy ever.

And even if your own country was doing great, what about the suffering masses in every other country on Earth? If your country is perfectly free, should you be sad because North Korea exists? Should Norwegians be gloomy because of American police brutality? As I've said before, any non-oblivious person has to choose between (a) daily misery, or (b) personal happiness in a world of woe.

When you put it that way, (b) is the only rational choice. Social Desirability Bias notwithstanding, each of us has the right – nay, the duty – to *try* to be happy despite the shortcomings of society and the universe. The key question then becomes: How?

I ponder this key question regularly. Here are the main steps I've taken to pursue happiness in 2020.

1. Continue ignoring the news unless it affects you personally. Dry statistics are OK, but avoid any information source that tries to engage your emotions.
2. Break bad but weakly enforced rules that get in your way. Never be Lawful Neutral.
3. Refuse to be stampeded.
4. Don't give up on your friends, but lower your expectations to rock bottom.
5. Living Dale Carnegie I: Try extra hard to make new friends.
6. Living Dale Carnegie II: Help your kids make new friends.
7. If schools won't even provide daycare, cut the cord and homeschool.
8. Start new projects that you enjoy.
9. Move to Texas for a spell.

10. General rule: Ask “what options are left?” not “what options are lost?” And make your Bubble beautiful!

Confession: My hardest realization of 2020 is that even most seemingly reasonable people go crazy in the face of a rather minor crisis. Biologically speaking, this pandemic could have easily have killed ten times as many people – or people we’d miss ten times as much. Never mind World War III. Taking a far view, I expect a lifetime median of two additional global events worse than COVID.

But I’m not going to let that bother me on a typical day, any more than I’m going to fret about my own mortality. Instead, I’m going to remember how lucky I am to be alive at all. As I wrote long ago:

If you read Woody Allen very charitably, he seems to have a perfectly reasonable desire to live longer. But his real complaint is that the time he has is meaningless because he only has a finite amount. And his conclusion resonates with a lot of people, and has for a long time.

I’ve never understood the appeal of this argument. If a finite quantity of life is worthless, how can an infinite quantity be desirable? Sure, you could trot out mathematical structures with this property, but come on. If an infinite span of days is so great, what’s stopping you from enjoying today?³

I suspect that many readers are telling themselves, “This is going to be a great year once the vaccine brings us to herd immunity.” Wrong. This is going to be a great year starting today if you choose to make it great. And if

you postpone happiness until society gets its act together, you'll be waiting for a lifetime.

Happy New Year now!

January 1, 2021

Notes

1. Bier, David. “Visualizing a 4-Year Assault on Legal Immigration: Trends Biden Must Reverse.” *CATO Institute*, December 11, 2020.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Make Your Own Bubble in 10 Easy Steps.” *EconLog*, April 11, 2013.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “The Economics of Woody Allen.” *EconLog*, June 29, 2005.



Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.



z-library.se singlelogin.re go-to-zlibrary.se single-login.ru



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>