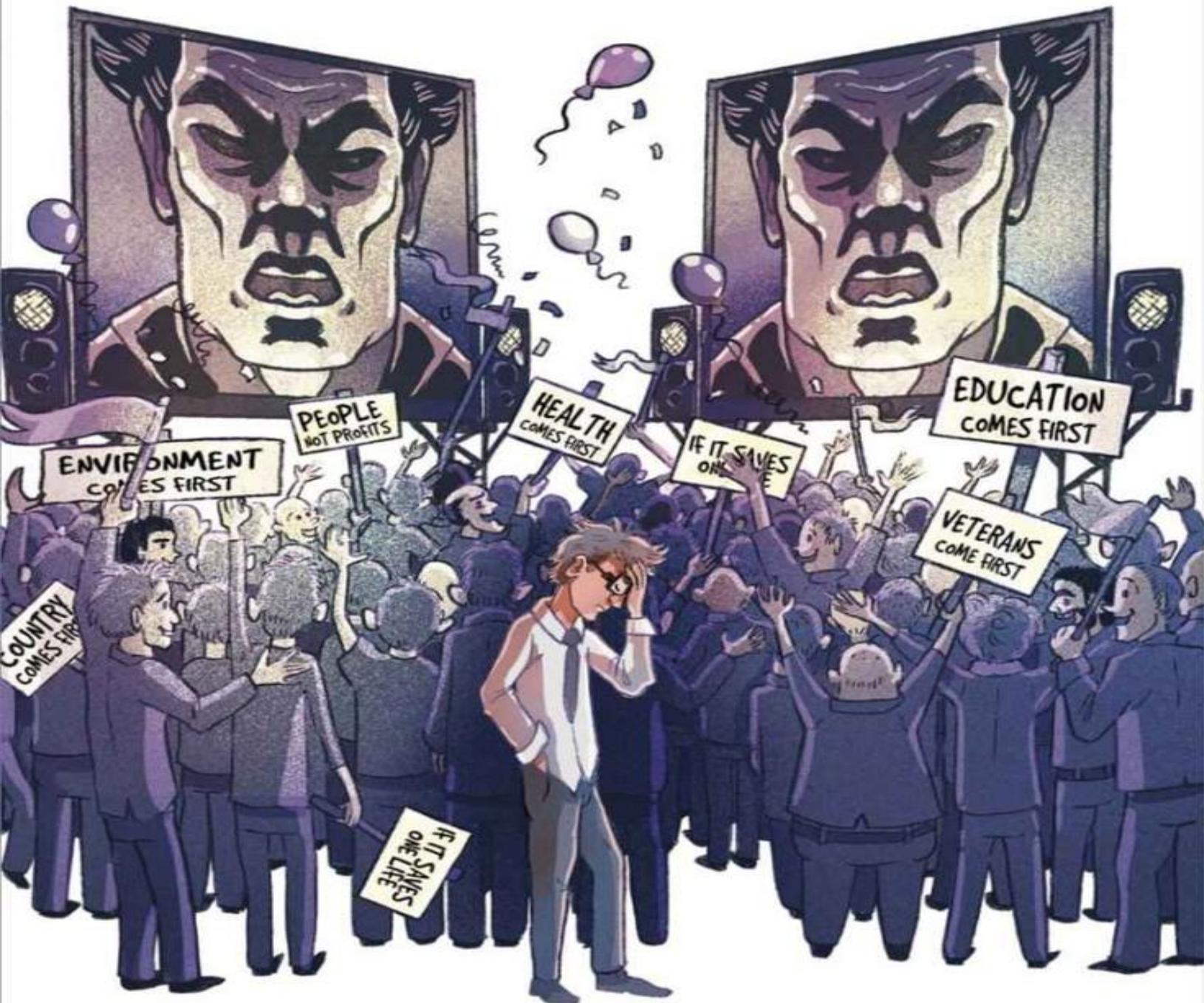


BRYAN CAPLAN

HOW EVIL ARE POLITICIANS?



Essays on
Demagoguery

Bryan Caplan

How Evil Are Politicians?

Essays on Demagoguery

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*To Don Boudreax, who knows a demagogue when he sees
one.*

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I

Evil Rules the World

How Evil Are Politicians?

I think politicians are, by and large, evil people. When I shared my verdict with a journalist friend, he strongly objected. He rightly pointed out that he's had ample personal interaction with politicians. In his experience, politicians of both parties generally *want* to do the right thing. Whatever their intellectual errors, their virtue is intact. My mental image of villainous politicians is at odds with the facts.

I'm happy to grant that my journalist friend's first-hand experience with politicians far exceeds my own. But I'm confident that if I saw what he saw, my doleful verdict would stay the same. Why? Because my standards of moral conduct are *much* higher than his, in two main ways.

First, virtuous people can't just conform to the expectations of their society. Everyone has at least a modest moral obligation to perform "due diligence" – to investigate whether their society's expectations are immoral. And whenever their society fails to measure up, virtuous people spurn social expectations and do the morally right thing.

Second, anyone in a position of political power has a greatly elevated moral obligation to perform this due diligence. Yes, with great power comes great responsibility. If you're in a position to pass or enforce laws, lives and freedom are in your hands. Common decency requires you to act with

extreme moral trepidation at all times, ever mindful of the possibility that you're trampling the rights of the morally innocent.

Note: Neither of these principles claims that politicians have to share my libertarian philosophy in order to be decent human beings.¹ They're procedural. They require every human being to seek out and seriously consider the main moral critiques of the status quo. And they enjoin politicians to make this intellectual hygiene their top priority. Until they calmly recuse themselves from their society and energetically weigh a wide range of moral arguments, they have no business lifting a political finger.

At this point, the iniquity of practicing politicians should be clear. How much time and mental energy does the average politician pour into moral due diligence? A few hours a year seems like a high estimate. They don't just fall a tad short of their moral obligations. They're too busy passing laws and giving orders to face the possibility that they're wielding power illegitimately.

Such negligence is scarcely surprising. After all, what's in it for the politicians? Political systems reward them for *seeming* good by *conventional* standards. If we're lucky, this spurs leaders to do what most people consider good. More likely, it spurs leaders to spin control – packaging even their worst actions in conventional moral garb. If there's a political system that affirmatively rewards politicians for conscientiously questioning mainstream moral standards, I've never heard of it. Politicians have no excuses for their shameful behavior, but like almost all wrong-doers, they have reasons.

Admittedly, if it turned out that our society's conventional moral standards were basically right, our politicians' vice would be harmless. That's a much bigger question. But whatever the whole truth about morality

might be, politicians – including the Americans politicians my journalist friend defends – are almost invariably guilty of pervasive gross moral negligence. Politicians, repent!

December 7, 2015

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Huemer’s Common-Sense Libertarianism.” *EconLog*, January 25, 2013.

Power-Hunger

“**G**reed is good.” After a few years in economics, the goodness of greed seems like common sense. But it’s not. In a randomly selected social environment, greed is brutal. If you’re carrying a bag of gold and meet a well-armed stranger in a remote jungle, you wouldn’t say, “As long as he’s greedy, I have nothing to worry about.” The knowledge that Nigerian spammers are greedy doesn’t incline you to send them your money. If you were looking for a caretaker for your elderly mother, discovering that a job candidate is “extremely greedy” would be a strong mark against him. As Marge Gunderson sadly muses at the end of *Fargo*, “So that was Mrs. Lundgaard on the floor in there. And I guess that was your accomplice in the wood chipper. And those three people in Brainerd. And for what? For a little bit of money. There’s more to life than a little money, you know. Don’t you know that?”

What economics teaches is not that greed is good, but that good incentives transform this questionable motive into awesome results. Greed plus property rights plus competition plus rationality plus reputation is good. Greed alone is film noir.

In Public Choice, also known as “economics of politics,” we usually assume that politicians are motivated not by greed, but by *power-hunger*. Of course, we rarely utter the word “power-hunger.” Instead, we call it

“vote maximization,” just as we call greed “profit maximization.” But when Public Choice pictures politicians, it pictures humans filled with lust for power.

Is this a reasonable picture of politicians’ psyches? Absolutely. That politicians crave power is as undeniable as that businesspeople crave profits. If you look at political history before the rise of democracy, we see virtually nothing other than dictators struggling to cement their power internally and expand their power externally. When these dictators lost wars, they lost territory and subjects, because virtually every dictator wanted to rule over as much land and as many people as possible.

Under democracy, politicians are less candid about their motives; they need us to like them, and power-hunger is not likeable.¹ But given its ubiquity throughout most of political history, can we really believe that the motive of power-hunger is no longer paramount? One of my favorite political insiders privately calls politicians of both parties “psychopaths” – and he’s on to something. Rising high on the pyramid of power is hard unless the love of power fuels your ascent.

In a randomly-selected social environment, power-hunger – like greed – is brutal. Just look at the history of warfare in all its hideousness – the endless bloodbaths over slivers of territory. Remember how leaders terrorized their rivals, their potential rivals, their imagined rivals. It’s sickening. If *Fargo* were a war story, and Marge Gunderson hunted war criminals, she might have sadly mused, “So that was Sarajevo on the floor in there. And I guess those were your accomplices in the mass grave. And those three hundred thousand people in Bosnia. And for what? For a little bit of power. There’s more to life than a little power, you know. Don’t you know that?”

In dictatorships, the causal chain from power-hunger to bad results is obvious. The fundamental question of Public Choice is: Does democracy motivate power-hungry politicians to do good despite their bad intentions? My admirable nemesis, Donald Wittman, tirelessly argues Yes, but to no avail. Democracy out-performs dictatorship, but that's damning with faint praise.

Once you thank the stars you aren't ruled by Louis XIV or Lenin, a grim truth remains: democracy gives power-hungry politicians *far* worse incentives than the market gives greedy business people. Above all, voters – unlike consumers – have no incentive to be rational, spurring power-hungry politicians to preach and practice endless demagoguery.² It's gotten worse lately, but it's always been terrible.³ Democracy hasn't turned politicians into decent human beings; it's only gilded their age-old power-lust with altruistic hypocrisy.⁴

So what can we do about our predicament? There are no easy answers, but I know where to start. Like alcoholics, we must admit we have a problem. Throughout history and around the world, the wicked rule.⁵ We should stop admiring them – especially the politicians on “our side” – and see them for the reprobates they are.

March 2, 2017

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Demagoguery Explained.” *EconLog*, May 3, 2014.
2. Caplan, Bryan. *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*. Princeton University Press, 2008.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “Why I’m Not Freaking Out.” *EconLog*, November 29, 2016.
4. Caplan, Bryan. “How the Welfare State Melts Your Conscience.” *EconLog*, July 7, 2015.
5. Caplan, Bryan. “How Evil Are Politicians?” *EconLog*, December 7, 2015.

Straw Men Rule

Yesterday I was on a panel on drug policy with a Virginia state senator.

As you'd expect, I made the case for full drug legalization. And as you'd expect, he objected. What's striking, though, is *how* he objected. His top arguments for roughly sticking with the status quo:

1. Hard drugs should be banned because they cause serious health and safety problems. Yea so does alcohol, but the Prohibition era shows that banning alcohol was a bad idea.
2. The people of Virginia think that illegal drugs should be illegal, but they don't think that alcohol should be illegal.
3. There have to be boundaries. Our boundary is that alcohol is legal for 21-year-olds, but illegal drugs are illegal for all ages.

If I were a staunch opponent of drug legalization, I would have yearned to decry the senator's arguments as straw men. The rejoinders are all too obvious, starting with:

1. Alcohol and tobacco cause more harm than hard drugs. And the negative side effects of modern drug Prohibition have been more serious than the negative side effects of historical alcohol Prohibition.
2. Virginians are wrong about a great many things; why not this?

3. You can say, “There have to be boundaries” about every stupid law on Earth, past, and present.

Strictly speaking, though, none of the senator’s arguments count as straw men. Why? Because he wasn’t attacking bad arguments for a view he opposed. He was *giving* bad arguments for a view he *accepted*.

The senator was a smart, articulate, experienced man. Why then didn’t he present decent arguments for his position? The best explanation is also the simplest: He doesn’t *know* any decent arguments for his position. How is that possible? Because the vast majority of people who favor drug prohibition don’t know any decent arguments for their position, either. No one has to foist “straw man” arguments on the mainstream; the mainstream *owns* those crummy arguments.¹

Of course, the fact that few supporters of X know any good argument for X doesn’t prove they’re wrong. But it should at least make us very suspicious about the validity of X. And this holds even if some rare bird crafts high-quality arguments for X. As I’ve explained before:

Suppose I’m right that almost everyone initially supports populist policies for inane reasons. If some of these people grow up to be sophisticated intellectuals, what do you think they’re going to do when they realize that the arguments that originally convinced them are just plain stupid? Are they going to dispassionately put aside the worldview that inspired them to become intellectuals in the first place, then calmly weigh the intellectually serious arguments for and against every feel-good policy on the books? Or are they going to act like defense attorneys – to use their powerful intellects to zealously defend the populist policies they’ve always loved?²

In any case, my meeting with the senator underscored what I've long maintained: In democracies, straw men rule.³ Politicians don't calmly search for the best possible policies. They don't even calmly search for intellectually impressive arguments for popular policies. Instead, they present popular arguments for popular policies – intellectual merit be damned.

P.S. The senator also quipped something along the lines of, “If you don’t like my policy positions, run against me in the next election!” This is directly analogous to a professional wrestler saying, “If you don’t like my policy positions, let’s wrestle for it!” Winning an election, pinning a man, and being right are three very different things.

December 3, 2015

Notes

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2. Caplan, Bryan. “Who Loves Bastiat and Who Loves Him Not.” *EconLog*, August 15, 2012.
3. Caplan, Bryan. *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*. Princeton University Press, 2008.

Demagoguery Explained

In the dictionary, “demagogues” are bad by definition.

In Merriam-Webster, a demagogue is “a political leader who tries to get support by making false claims and promises and using arguments based on emotion rather than reason.”

In the Oxford Dictionary, he’s “a political leader who seeks support by appealing to popular desires and prejudices rather than by using rational argument.”

In the Wiktionary, he’s a “political orator or leader who gains favor by pandering to or exciting the passions and prejudices of the audience rather than by using rational argument.”

In your calmer moments, though, it’s tempting to dismiss the concept. In practice, isn’t a “demagogue” just a political opponent with a silver tongue? Isn’t “demagoguery” simply rhetoric that hits political nerves you wish would stay eternally numb?

But before you ditch the whole concept, let me propose the following refinement: *Demagoguery is the politics of Social Desirability Bias.*¹

The heart of Social Desirability Bias: Some types of claims *sound good or bad regardless of the facts*. “Helping people” sounds good. “Acquiring luxuries” sounds bad. “Saving American jobs” sounds good. “Cheap nannies for upper-middle-class families” sound bad. “Supporting our

“troops” sounds good. “Sympathizing with the enemy” sounds bad. “Raising the minimum wage” sounds good. “Measuring disemployment effects” sounds bad.

Any competent philosopher can construct cases where what sounds good is bad and what sounds bad is good. For instance: The minimum wage, good as it sounds, would be bad if it sharply increased the unemployment of low-skilled workers.² But when our competent philosopher runs for office, he has a clear incentive to keep his doubts to himself. If X sounds good, saying “Hooray for X” is a much easier way to win over an audience than “Sure X sounds good, but let’s calm down and consider the possibility that X is in fact bad.”

It’s possible, I grant, that X’s only *sound* good when those X’s *are* good. If so, we can safely ignore Social Desirability Bias. To test this optimistic view, I propose the following thought experiment:

Imagine we do vastly more X. Could you then publicly declare, “We’re doing too much X” without cringing?

If the government spent ten times as much on terminally ill children, would you feel comfortable announcing, “Government is wasting money on terminally ill children”? If the government spent ten times as much on war heroes, would you feel comfortable shouting, “Government gives too much to war heroes”? Don’t want to say such things ever ever ever? Then the policy views you and your fellow citizens cherish are probably infected by Social Desirability Bias.

The same goes for the Panglossian view that “X sounds bad” solely because “X is bad.” Imagine we increased our anti-terrorism efforts ten-

fold. Would that remove the stigma from saying, “Let’s relax our anti-terrorism efforts”? Not bloody likely.

What then is demagoguery? Embracing Social Desirability Bias to gain power. Making a career out of praising what sounds good and attacking what sounds bad.

What’s the alternative? Conscientiously searching for and publicizing the many disconnects between what’s pleasing to the ear and what’s true.

You could object that no public enemy of Social Desirability Bias could succeed in politics. While I tend to agree, that realization should terrify you. Social Desirability Bias is a severe mental shortcoming, but to succeed in politics you have to feed it rather than starve it.

I know these claims sound bad. But if you reject them *because* they sound bad, you are only proving my point.

May 3, 2014

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Social Desirability Bias: How Psych Can Salvage Econo-Cynicism.” *EconLog*, April 21, 2014.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Yes Donald, Beliefs About Economics Do Affect Policy Preferences.” *EconLog*, June 4, 2005.

Why Dodge the Question?

Politicians are notoriously fond of “dodging questions.” But why would anyone do this? If a wife asks her husband, “Where were you last night?”, dodging the question is practically his *worst* possible option. After all, if he won’t answer, her common-sense reaction is to assume the worst.

What makes politics different?

The best explanation, once again, centers on Social Desirability Bias.¹ In plain English: When the truth sounds bad, people bend the truth. When *all* straightforward answers sound bad, similarly, people refuse to answer. And since politics revolves around sounding good rather than doing good, politicians habitually dodge hard questions.² Hard questions like:

1. “Who do you respect more – veterans or teachers?”
2. “What is the maximum number of American deaths we should pay to defeat Saddam Hussein?”
3. “How should we respond if a welfare recipient spends their entire check on the first day of the month?”
4. “What is the biggest problem we should do nothing to fix?”
5. The classic: “If Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?”

What makes these questions so hard? It varies. For #1, the problem is that people love both veterans and teachers, so either way it seems like you’re

insulting a beloved profession. For #2, a low answer seems cowardly, and a high answer seems callous – and every number seems ghoulish. For #3, “Tough luck” sounds cruel, and “Give them extra money” seems weak.³ For #4, almost any answer sounds callous and defeatist. #5 famously forced Michael Dukakis to either sound like a wimp or betray his long-standing opposition to the death penalty.

On reflection, generating no-win questions is child’s play. If you’re a successful politician, journalists and detractors never stop asking them. But never fear. Virtually every successful politician knows a work-around. When the only way to win is not to play, politicians do not play.

All of which illustrates a deeper lesson: Politics is theater – a gigantic effort to please ears and warm hearts. Asking hard questions is rarely a sincere effort to acquire information; pseudo-answers to such questions aren’t a sincere effort to provide information. If you think this is all benign, think again.³ Reality itself poses many hard questions; they’re called “trade-offs.” And the typical politician would rather dodge them than deal with them.⁴

HT: Inspired during my Oslo interview with Åse Brandvold.

August 27, 2018

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1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Diction of Social Desirability Bias.” *EconLog*, April 22, 2016.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Demagoguery Explained.” *EconLog*, May 3, 2014.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “The Political Economy of Social Desirability Bias.” *EconLog*, December 21, 2017.
4. Caplan, Bryan. “How Evil Are Politicians?” *EconLog*, December 7, 2015.

21 Short Claims About Political Motivation

Yesterday I wrote:

If you want lots of X, but are too ignorant to evaluate X's indirect effects, you probably just really love X. If you want lots of ice cream, but are too ignorant to evaluate ice cream's effect on your health, you probably just really love ice cream. If you want lots of government, but are too ignorant to evaluate government's overall consequences, you probably just really love government.¹

Lest you think I'm picking on liberals, I now proceed to broadly generalize my initial claim.

1. If you want lots of defense spending, but are too ignorant to evaluate defense spending's overall consequences, you probably just really love defense spending.
2. If you want lots of liberty, but are too ignorant to evaluate liberty's overall consequences, you probably just really love liberty.
3. If you want lots of education, but are too ignorant to evaluate education's overall consequences, you probably just really love education.

4. If you want lots of labor regulation, but are too ignorant to evaluate labor regulation's overall consequences, you probably just really love labor regulation.
5. If you want to invade lots of countries, but are too ignorant to evaluate the overall consequences of invading countries, you probably just really love invading countries.
6. If you want lots of environmental regulation, but are too ignorant to evaluate environmental regulation's overall consequences, you probably just really love environmental regulation.
7. If you want lots of deregulation, but are too ignorant to evaluate deregulation's overall consequences, you probably just really love deregulation.
8. If you want lots of taxes on the rich, but are too ignorant to evaluate taxes on the rich's overall consequences, you probably just really love taxes on the rich.
9. If you want lots of tax cuts, but are too ignorant to evaluate tax cuts' overall consequences, you probably just really hate taxes.
10. If you want lots of freedom of speech, but are too ignorant to evaluate freedom of speech's overall consequences, you probably just really love freedom of speech.
11. If you want strict drug laws, but are too ignorant to evaluate drug laws' overall consequences, you probably just really love drug laws.
12. If you want to end drug prohibition, but are too ignorant to evaluate drug prohibition's overall consequences, you probably just really hate drug prohibition.
13. If you want much lower population, but are too ignorant to evaluate much lower population's overall consequences, you probably just

really hate people.

14. If you want much higher population, but are too ignorant to evaluate much higher population's overall consequences, you probably just really love people.
15. If you want much lower business taxes, but are too ignorant to evaluate business taxes' overall consequences, you probably just really hate business taxes.
16. If you want drastic welfare cuts, but are too ignorant to evaluate welfare cuts' overall consequences, you probably just really hate welfare.
17. If you want much lower immigration, but are too ignorant to evaluate immigration's overall consequences, you probably just really hate immigration.
18. If you want much higher immigration, but are too ignorant to evaluate immigration's overall consequences, you probably just really love immigration.
19. If you want lots of trade restrictions, but are too ignorant to evaluate trade restrictions' overall consequences, you probably just really love trade restrictions.
20. If you want far fewer unions, but are too ignorant to evaluate unions' overall consequences, you probably just really hate unions.
21. If you want lots more government health care, but are too ignorant to evaluate government health care's overall consequences, you probably just really love government health care.

Note that in each case, I say "probably." There actually is an elegant moral framework that justifies strong moral views in the face of deep ignorance. I

call it weak deontology.² On this view, some policies are morally obligatory *unless* there is *strong* evidence that their consequences are *very* bad.

But does anyone really think that ignorant political activists are this philosophically sophisticated? Emotion-driven stories of the form, “If you want lots more X, but are too ignorant to evaluate X’s overall consequences, you probably just really love X” are none too flattering. But if you listen to the silly way most activists talk, the unflattering story seems very true.

Disagree? What if I amend my statement to, “But if you listen to the silly way most activists who disagree with you talk, the unflattering story seems very true”?

July 2, 2014

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Liberal Authoritarianism.” *EconLog*, July 1, 2014.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “The Problem of Political Authority by Michael Huemer.” *EconLog*, January 17, 2013.

How Dems and Reps Differ: Against the Conventional Wisdom

A while back, Greg Mankiw praised Peggy Noonan for “summarizing a key difference between the political parties.”¹ As Noonan puts it:

Neither party ever gets it quite right, the balance between the taxed and the needy, the suffering of one sort and the suffering of another. You might say that in this both parties are equally cold and equally warm, only to two different classes of citizens.

In my view, though, Noonan is only successful at summarizing popular misconceptions about the differences between the political parties.

The first big misconception is the parties’ key differences are substantive. They aren’t. Reps that don’t want to get rid of the welfare state. Almost all Reps support spending a big chunk of GDP on America’s poor and old. And Dems don’t want anything like socialism. Almost all Dems want America to remain a country where markets are the default and people can get rich if they play their cards right.

So what is the “key difference” between the parties? Rhetoric. When Republicans advocate a small contraction of the welfare state, Democrats claim that Republicans totally oppose the welfare state. And many

Republicans oblige them by standing up for “liberty” and “responsibility.” Similarly, when Democrats advocate a small expansion in the welfare state, Republicans claim that Democrats oppose free markets. And many Democrats oblige them by saying things like “markets only benefit the rich.”

This rhetorical illusion is so powerful that when a Democrat like Clinton adopts many pro-market reforms, Republicans still hate him as a 60s radical. And when Bush II sharply expands the welfare state, Democrats still hate him as a billionaire’s lackey.

The second big misconception is that the parties’ rhetoric makes sense on its own terms. It doesn’t. If Dems really cared about poor human beings, they would quit worrying about the American old, most of whom aren’t poor. In fact, they would quit worrying about the American “poor,” because by world standards, they’re doing fine. Instead, Dems would concentrate all their efforts on helping absolutely poor foreigners, presumably through a mixture of permitting massive immigration, and redirecting welfare to the world’s bottom billions.

Similarly, if Reps really cared about “over-burdened” tax-payers, they would try to diminish the burden in the only sustainable way: Big cuts in spending. They would be crusading against the popular programs like Social Security and Medicare that absorb most of our tax dollars. While they’re at it, they might want to do a little cost/benefit analysis of the War on Terror.²

I understand, of course, that if either party tried to bring its substance in sync with its rhetoric, it would go down in flames. As the Median Voter Theorem explains, parties that refuse to move to the political center don’t survive. What the MVT fails to predict, though, is the disconnect between

partisan substance and partisan rhetoric. You'd think that rhetoric would be every bit as moderate as action – but it's not.

What's going on? My best guess is that the rhetoric is the bone each party throws its idealists – “If you vote for us, we'll pretend to want radical change.” But perhaps even moderates enjoy the illusion of a partisan rift – or at least the illusion that they're on the side of principled moderation against rabid extremism.

September 7, 2008

Notes

1. Mankiw, Greg. “The Political Divide.” *Greg Mankiw's Blog*, August 28, 2008.
2. Boudreaux, Don. “Tierney on Mueller and Terrorism.” *Cafe Hayek*, September 9, 2006.

Moral Approximates

I urge you to beware the temptation of pride – the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.

– Ronald Reagan’s “Evil Empire” Speech

During the Cold War, folks like Ronald Reagan accused their domestic opponents of believing in the “moral equivalence” of the United States and the Soviet Union. Having lived through the era, I am confident that believers in moral equivalence existed. Knowing the relevant history, I agree that this was an absurd belief. However bad the United States was, the Soviet Union was vastly worse.¹

If you want to nitpick, admittedly, we never find literal moral equivalents in the real world. Why? Because in a continuous world, one side in any conflict is bound to be at least a *little* worse. Still, careful examination of real-world conflict does occasionally uncover not moral equivalents, but moral *approximates*. Though the two sides’ moral status is not precisely equal, they are morally more-or-less the same.

It's easiest to identify examples that are far away in time and place. During the Wars of Religion, who was worse – the Catholics or the Protestants? During World War I, who was worse – the Germans or the Russians? During the War of the Roses, who was worse – the Yorks or the Lancasters? You could plead ignorance. Yet even if you studied the history for a year, you would plausibly conclude that the two sides were moral approximates – both sinned so egregiously that it really is hard to know who was worse.

For recent and ongoing conflicts, assertions of moral approximation naturally inspire far more push back. If we were rational, however, the opposite would be true. The very fact that people have strong emotions about recent and ongoing conflicts is a strong reason to discount their judgment. Furthermore, when a conflict is recent or ongoing, we usually lack a great deal of not-yet-released relevant information. No one is likely to scare up shocking new revelations about the Lancasters, but in fifty years we'll have a *much* better understanding of what the Trump administration actually did.

Those limitations in mind, here are the top three moral approximations I am willing to defend.

1. *Communism and Nazism are moral approximates.*² Why? Both movements were fanatical attempts to build dystopian societies – and both self-righteously murdered tens of millions of innocent people. Contrary to much propaganda, Communists did not have noticeably better motives. Both groups imagined that a totalitarian society would be a big improvement over the status quo – and recklessly embraced the necessity of mass murder to get there.³

2. *Socialism and fascism are moral approximates.*⁴ Why? Socialism is a toned-down version of Communism; fascism is a toned-down version of Nazism. As toned-down versions, they aim for much less, and murder far fewer people in the process. Yet the vision of both movements – society as a big family with a common purpose – remains dystopian. And while their methods are far less brutal than Communism or Nazism, socialism and fascism both casually advocate pervasive coercion for flimsy reasons. (My main doubt here is that while I've repeatedly publicly debated socialists, I would not so engage a fascist. Doesn't that show that I think fascism is markedly worse? Not exactly. The main reason I don't debate fascists is that avowed fascism is now so low-status that its *adherents* are low-quality and scary.⁵ In a world where fascists were as mainstream as socialists, I would debate them).

3. *The Democratic and Republican parties are moral approximates.*

Why? Both are dogmatic, emotional, and demagogic. Neither party internalizes the maxim that with great power comes great responsibility – or dwells on the possibility that they might be mistreating people who don't agree with them. Both parties say they want various radical changes, many of which seem very bad. The policies Democrats and Republicans actually impose when they have power are similarly mediocre, though that doesn't stop them from rhetorically making mountains out of molehills. On immigration, for example, the Democratic-Republican debate basically comes down to whether the border should be 98% closed or 99% closed. Though I prefer 98% to 99%, it's approximately the same.

I am well aware that both Democrats and Republicans will angrily protest being lumped together; in their eyes, the differences between their parties are “huge.” My question for them: In 200 years, how big will these “huge differences” look to historians? Yes, during the Wars of Religion, Catholics and Protestants mutually called each other servants of the Antichrist. Today, however, we can plainly see that both sides were unhinged.⁶

Similarly, if you carefully studied the politics of, say, France in 1970, would you really conclude that the arguments that enraged contemporary French partisans were, in fact, a big deal?

Back in 2016, many Democrats told me that Trump’s election exposed the sheer evil of the Republican Party. In a way, this understates. I say that the mere fact that a man like Trump did well in the primaries shows that the Republican Party is rotten. However, I’d say the same about Bernie Sanders’s success in 2016. The mere fact that a man like Sanders did well in the primaries shows that the Democratic Party is rotten, too.

You could respond, “Suppose Democrats and Republicans really are moral approximates. Shouldn’t an economist, of all people, still be eager to discover the *slightly* lesser evil?” My answer: If I were America’s kingmaker, then yes. But when I’m just one voice among tens of millions, no.⁷ While I’m always happy to share my views with curious Democrats or Republicans, I’m too much of a puritan to ever join either party.⁸

P.S. Lest anyone misinterpret me, I think the Democratic and Republican parties are *markedly* better than socialism and fascism, which are in turn *markedly* better than Communism and Nazism. Mathematically: D≈R>>S≈F>>C≈N.

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Worst They Can Do.” *EconLog*, March 24, 2014.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Communism.” *EconLib*.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “The Banality of Leninism.” *EconLog*, March 19, 2012.
4. Caplan, Bryan. “Socialism.” *EconLib*; Caplan, Bryan. “Fascism.” *EconLib*.
5. Caplan, Bryan. “Intellectual Gladiators.” *EconLog*, June 21, 2006.
6. Caplan, Bryan. “The Outsider Advantage.” *EconLog*, April 7, 2015.
7. Caplan, Bryan. “Why I Don’t Vote: The Honest Truth.” *EconLog*, September 13, 2016.
8. Caplan, Bryan. “The Identity of Shame.” *EconLog*, October 30, 2014.

Liberal Authoritarianism

Critics often view liberals as deeply authoritarian. Most liberals naturally object to this unflattering claim. Critics notwithstanding, liberals don't *relish* using the power of government. They don't have a raw preference for forcing everyone live their way. Instead, liberals maintain, they favor using the power of government to advance liberal aims because such policies have good overall consequences.

Are liberals seeing their collective motivations clearly? Not really. For starters, *most* liberals – like most human beings – don't know enough social science to begin to weigh policies' overall consequences. The best they can do, as Kahneman explains, is covertly change the subject, then answer easier questions.¹ To evaluate the overall consequences of raising the minimum wage, for example, you need to know the elasticity of labor demand.² Few laymen even understand the concept of elasticity, so they mentally substitute easier questions like, "Would I be happy if employers gave low-skilled workers a raise?"

How does this show that most liberals aren't consequentialists? Well, if most liberals don't know enough social science to weigh policies' overall consequences, most can't honestly say, "I'm a liberal *because* using the power of government to advance liberal aims has overall good consequences." If a liberal spends near-zero mental effort studying policies'

consequences, something other than his beliefs about policies' consequences must be driving his liberalism.

Such as? The sheer love of government isn't the only possibility, but it's a good guess. Consider: If you want lots of X, but are too ignorant to evaluate X's indirect effects, you probably just really love X. If you want lots of ice cream, but are too ignorant to evaluate ice cream's effect on your health, you probably just really love ice cream. If you want lots of government, but are too ignorant to evaluate the government's overall consequences, you probably just really love government.

At this point, the thoughtful liberal may clarify his position: "When I claimed that liberals were consequentialists rather than authoritarians, I was only talking about liberal policy wonks like me who *do* know a lot of social science." When a liberal grasps the connection between the minimum wage and labor demand elasticity – and hundreds of other esoteric policy points – his consequentialist self-portrait becomes fairly credible.

Does this really refute critics' charge that liberals are authoritarian? It depends. You could define an authoritarian as "someone who *relishes* the use of government power." On this definition, liberal wonks plausibly escape the authoritarian charge.

But that's an awfully strong definition. I'd suggest a more reasonable definition: an authoritarian is "someone who *doesn't mind* the use of government power." This doesn't mean that you're an "authoritarian" if you favor using government power under any circumstances. What it means, rather, is that you're an authoritarian unless you have at least a *modest presumption* against using government power.

On the latter definition, "I'm a consequentialist" doesn't rebut the authoritarian accusation. It confirms it. Why? Because consequentialism is

inherently authoritarian!

Suppose the government forcing everyone to do A has slightly better consequences than the next-best alternative of leaving people alone. True to his name, the consequentialist announces, “We should force everyone to do A.” A nay-sayer raises his hand and says, “What’s the big deal? I don’t want to do A. Leave me alone.” The clever consequentialist responds, “My calculations of the overall consequences take your reluctance into account. So we should still force you to do A.” The nay-sayer nays, “The overall consequences are only slightly better. Just leave me alone.”

In the end, the consequentialist has to either abandon consequentialism or say, “I refuse to leave you alone. Although the difference between the best and second-best is small, you have to do A whether you like it or not.” And isn’t that an awfully authoritarian attitude?

P.S. I leave the writing of the companion post on “Conservative Authoritarianism” as an exercise for the reader.

July 1, 2014

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Eureka! Economic Illiteracy as Mental Substitution.” *EconLog*, January 10, 2012.

2. Caplan, Bryan. “Who Loves Bastiat and Who Loves Him Not.”
EconLog, August 15, 2012.

If the Only Way You Can Get Your Great Idea Implemented...

Economics textbooks are full of clever-and-appealing policy proposals. Proposals like: “Let’s redistribute money to the desperately poor” and “Let’s tax goods with negative externalities.”¹ They’re so clever and so appealing that it’s hard to understand how any smart, well-meaning person could demur. When critics appeal to “public choice problems,” it’s tempting to tell the critics that *they’re* the problem. The political system isn’t *that* dysfunctional, is it? In any case, reflexively whining, “The political system will muck up your clever, appealing policy proposal,” hardly makes that system work better. The naysayers should become part of the solution: Endorse the clever-and-appealing policy proposals – and strive to bring them to life.

When you look at the real world, though, you see something strange: Almost *no one* actually pushes for the textbooks’ clever-and-appealing policy proposals. Instead, the people inspired by the textbooks routinely attach themselves to trendy-but-awful policy proposals. If you point out the discrepancy, they’re often too annoyed to respond. When they do, reformers shrug and say: “The clever-and-appealing policy never has – and probably never will – have much political support. So we have to do this instead.”

Examples? You start off by advocating high-impact redistribution to help poor children and the severely disabled... and end defending the ludicrously expensive and wasteful Social Security program.² “Unfortunately, the only politically viable way to help the poor is to help everyone.” Or you start off advocating Pigovian taxes to clean the air and end up defending phone books of picayune environmental regulations. “Unfortunately, this is the way pollution policy actually works.”

Don’t believe me? Here’s an example courtesy of Paul Krugman:

But if a nation in flames isn’t enough to produce a consensus for action — if it isn’t even enough to produce some moderation in the anti-environmentalist position — what will? The Australia experience suggests that climate denial will persist come hell or high water — that is, through devastating heat waves and catastrophic storm surges alike...

[...]

But if climate denial and opposition to action are immovable even in the face of obvious catastrophe, what hope is there for avoiding the apocalypse? Let’s be honest with ourselves: Things are looking pretty grim. However, giving up is not an option. What’s the path forward?

The answer, pretty clearly, is that scientific persuasion is running into sharply diminishing returns. Very few of the people still denying the reality of climate change or at least opposing doing anything about it will be moved by further accumulation of evidence, or even by a proliferation of new disasters. Any action

that does take place will have to do so in the face of intractable right-wing opposition.

This means, in turn, that climate action will have to offer immediate benefits to large numbers of voters, because policies that seem to require widespread sacrifice — such as policies that rely mainly on carbon taxes — would be viable only with the kind of political consensus we clearly aren't going to get.

What might an effective political strategy look like? ... [O]ne way to get past the political impasse on climate might be via “an emphasis on huge infrastructural projects that created jobs” — in other words, a Green New Deal. Such a strategy could give birth to a “large climate-industrial complex,” which would actually be a good thing in terms of political sustainability.

Notice the pattern.

Step 1: Economics textbooks offer a clever-and-appealing policy proposal: Let's tax carbon emissions to curtail the serious negative externalities of fossil fuels. It's cheap, it's effective, it provides great static *and* dynamic incentives. Public choice problems? Don't listen to those naysayers.

Step 2: Argh, Pigovian taxes are going nowhere.

Step 3: Let's have a trendy-but-awful populist infrastructure program to get the masses on board.

So what? For starters, any smart activist who reaches Step 3 tacitly concedes that public choice problems are *dire*. You offer the public a clever-and-appealing remedy for a serious social ill, and democracy yawns. To get

action, you have to forget about cost or cost-effectiveness – and just try to drug the public with demagoguery.

Note: I'm *not* attacking Krugman for having little faith in democracy. His underlying lack of faith in democracy is fully justified. I only wish that Krugman would loudly embrace the public choice framework that intellectually justifies his lack of faith.

Once you pay proper respect to public choice theory, however, you cannot simply continue on your merry way. You have to ponder its central normative lesson: Don't advocate government action merely because a clever-and-appealing policy proposal passes a cost-benefit test. Instead, look at the trendy-but-awful policies that will actually be adopted – and see if *they* pass a cost-benefit test. If they don't, you should advocate laissez-faire despite all those shiny ideas in the textbook.

Krugman could naturally reply, "I've done the math. Global warming is so terrible that trendy-but-awful policies are our least-bad bet." To the best of my knowledge, though, this contradicts mainstream estimates of the costs of warming.³ That aside, why back a Green New Deal instead of deregulation of nuclear power or geoengineering? If recalcitrant public opinion thwarts your clever-and-appealing remedy, maybe you started out on the wrong path in the first place.

Unfair? Well, this is hardly the first time that Krugman has rationalized destructive populism when he really should have reconsidered. Krugman knows that immigration is the world's fastest way to escape absolute poverty. He knows that standard complaints about immigration are, at best, exaggerated. But he's still an immigration skeptic, because:

The New Deal made America a vastly better place, yet it probably wouldn't have been possible without the immigration restrictions that went into effect after World War I. For one thing, absent those restrictions, there would have been many claims, justified or not, about people flocking to America to take advantage of welfare programs.

Notice the pattern.

Step 1: You start with the textbook case for a welfare state to alleviate domestic poverty. Public choice problems? Bah.

Step 2: Next, you decide that you can't get that welfare state without horrible collateral damage.

Step 3: So you casually embrace the status quo, without seriously engaging obvious questions, like: "Given political constraints, perhaps it's actually better not to have the New Deal?" or even "How *close* can we get to the New Deal *without* limiting immigration?"

The moral: If the only way you can get your great idea implemented is to mutilate it and/or package it with a pile of expensive junk, you really should wonder, "Is it still worth it?"

Well, is it?

January 23, 2020

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Externalities.” *EconLib*.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Making Populism Serious: The Case of Social Security.” *EconLog*, August 16, 2012.
3. Murphy, Robert P. “William Nordhaus versus the United Nations on Climate Change Economics.” *EconLog*, November 5, 2018.

A Short Hop from Bleeding Heart to Mailed Fist

When Hugo Chavez began ruling Venezuela, he sounded like a classic bleeding heart – full of pity for the poor and downtrodden. Plenty of people took him at his words – not just Venezuelans, but much of the international bleeding-heart community. By the time Chavez died, however, many admirers were already having second thoughts about his dictatorial tendencies. Nicolas Maduro, Chavez's handpicked successor, amply confirmed these fears. Almost everyone now plainly sees the mailed fist of the brutal dictator Chavez II.

This brings us to two facts about the political world. Let's call them Strange and Meta-Strange.

The Strange Fact: This transition from bleeding heart to mailed fist is *common*. Almost every Communist dictatorship launches with mountains of humanitarian propaganda. Yet ultimately, almost everyone who doesn't fear for his life wakes up and smells the tyranny.

The Meta-Strange Fact: People rarely describe the Strange Fact as “strange”!

What's so strange about the Strange Fact? Most obviously, the extreme hypocrisy. Governments that vocally proclaim their compassion for the meek – most obviously the Soviet Union and Maoist China – commit a

grossly disproportionate share of mass murder and other violations of human rights.

What's so strange about the Meta-Strange Fact? Well, picture the most vocally compassionate person you personally know, the person who seems most obsessed with the interests and feelings of others. Wouldn't you be shocked to discover that they burn babies with cigarettes when you're not looking? It's one thing for people to fall short of saintly ideals; it's quite another for people who uphold saintly ideals to be downright wicked.

What's going on? Here are some possibilities:

1. *Politics is a brutal game.* When bleeding hearts take over a government, brutal outsiders smell their weakness, force their way in, bully their way to the top, and unleash hell. The obvious problem with this story, of course, is that the bleeding hearts and mailed fists are usually the same people, though sometimes at different stages in their political career.
2. *In this wicked world, the best way to pursue bleeding-heart policies is with a mailed fist.* Sure, it would be nice if we could harmoniously adopt bleeding-heart policies. But in the real world, the forces of reaction and selfishness will try to obstruct and reverse bleeding-heart policies with every step. Unless, of course, you terrorize them into submission. The obvious problem with this story is that countries that pursue bleeding-heart policies with a mailed fist look like total disasters. Most of them face horrifying civil wars; and even when the dust settles, the common man's quality of life remains very low.
3. *Hostile foreigners force bleeding hearts to adopt the mailed fist.* When countries pursue bleeding-heart policies, evil countries like the United

States try to isolate, punish, and overthrow them. The best way to protect your noble bleeding-heart experiment, sadly, is to prioritize the military and internal security. Then the international community has the effrontery to call these unwelcome defensive measures “the mailed fist.” The obvious problem with this story: One of the quickest ways to anger countries like the United States *is* to blatantly use the mailed fist (especially if you combine your mailed fist with anti-Western rhetoric). Furthermore, if extreme bleeding-heart policies really were prone to provoke powerful foreigners, a sincere bleeding heart would moderate enough to appease these foreigners.¹ “You don’t like my total war against illiteracy and disease? Fine, I’ll just do a half-war against illiteracy and disease.”

4. *The bleeding-heart rhetoric is mostly propaganda; the main goal is the mailed fist.* Even the most abusive romances usually start with a honeymoon period. Similarly, dictators rarely gain total power by growling, “Give me total power.” Instead, they woo the people with flowery words and symbolic gifts. Part of the goal, of course, is to trick your victims until you get the upper hand. But the flowery words and symbolic gifts are also effective ways to inspire *gratitude* in both recipients and bystanders.² This story often seems right to me, but it does implausibly downplay the bleeding hearts’ ideological fervor.
5. *Bleeding-heart rhetoric is disguised hate speech.* When activists blame the bourgeoisie for causing hunger, disease, and illiteracy, perhaps their main concern isn’t actually alleviating hunger, disease, or illiteracy. While they’d *like* these problems to disappear, the bleeding hearts’ top priority could be making the bourgeoisie suffer. The mailed fist systematizes that suffering. It’s tempting to dismiss this story as

cartoonish, but it's more plausible than you think. Human beings often resent first – and rationalize said resentment later. They also loathe admitting this ugly fact. Actions, however, speak louder than words. People like Chavez and Maduro can accept their failure to help the poor, but not their failure to crush their hated enemies.

6. *Bleeding-heart policies work so poorly that only the mailed fist can sustain them.* In this story, the bleeding hearts are at least initially sincere. If their policies worked well enough to inspire broad support, the bleeding hearts would play nice. Unfortunately, bleeding-heart policies are exorbitantly expensive and often directly counter-productive. Pursued aggressively, they predictably lead to disaster. At this point, a saintly bleeding heart will admit error and back off. A pragmatic bleeding heart will compromise. The rest, however, respond to their own failures with rage and scapegoating. Once you institutionalize that rage and scapegoating, the mailed fist has arrived. This story also seems pretty solid. It downplays the self-conscious Machiavellians, but only by recasting them as childish fanatics.

If you don't know much about the actual history of radical bleeding-heart regimes, I'll admit that stories 4-6 sound overblown and unfair. But I've devoted much of my life to studying this history. All I can say is: If your story isn't ugly, it isn't true.

January 30, 2019

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “My Life of Appeasement.” *EconLog*, August 5, 2014.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “How the Welfare State Melts Your Conscience.” *EconLog*, July 7, 2015.

Could Such a Man Care?

Nicolas Maduro now rules a land of chronic hunger, horrific crime, terrible fear, and mass exodus. How does he maintain his dictatorship? With a pact of steel between his ruling party, the military, the secret police, and on-site foreign allies – especially Cubans. You would have to be mad to think that Maduro's doing all this for the good of his people, or the good of the world. His only credible motivation is power-lust gone wild.¹ Maduro is a pervert for power.

He'll never admit this, of course. He still claims he's doing it all for the people and the higher good. Here's Maduro in an interview:

Venezuela is a country with dignity. We are patriots, revolutionaries. We have an ideology, that of Simon Bolivar. Our movement came from the depths from the Venezuelan people. We've been governing democratically for 20 years. Everything that we are, everything that we have, we have because of the popular vote.

This raises a deeper question. Namely: Deep in his soul, when did Maduro stray from the path of decency?

For Maduro's former fans, it's tempting to sigh, "Power corrupts." Power turns a good man bad. He – like his mentor Chavez – started out as an idealist. Yet ironically, he ended up a tyrant.

On reflection, however, this “ironic” account is absurd. Think about the nicest, sweetest person you personally know. Can you seriously imagine that *this* person, given power, would forge a brutal police state, destroy the economy, and cling to power with fire and blood? I can’t.

Indeed, think about the average person you know. You can probably imagine that this person would *go along* with great evil out of cowardice. Still, would the average person you know *take the initiative* to commit these horrors? That doesn’t make sense to me.

The lesson: Maduro was never an idealist. Indeed, he was never an average person. The average person in his shoes would have done far less evil and relinquished power long ago. What Maduro has done reveals what Maduro has always been: insatiably hungry for power.

So what? Well, while this is all clear in hindsight, Maduro used to have millions of fans all around the world. Millions of fans took his rhetoric at face value. Millions of fans thought he was a noble man. And these fans would have called *me* paranoid and unfair for calling their idol a power-luster.

The fans’ error would have been understandable if Maduro were the first politician to start with idealistic rhetoric and end in savagery. In fact, however, history provides countless examples of this pattern. Which means two things.

First, while extreme power-lusters are a small fraction of humanity, they are a large fraction of successful politicians.

Second, regular human beings are awful at the *detection* of extreme power-lusters. When humans hear flowery words, their impulse is to take them at face value, instead of reminding themselves, “That’s just what a power-luster would say – and politics is packed with power-lusters.”

You could object, “Well, popular gullibility is for the best. If the man in the street assessed politicians realistically, political progress would be almost impossible.” The tempting reply is, “Yes, but political disaster would be almost impossible too.”

This reply, however, gives gullibility too much credit. Imagine a world where people were ever-mindful of politicians’ proclivity for power-lust. What would happen? Politicians would compete for popularity by promising and doing things that power-lusters *hate to do*. Things like: Respecting individual freedom, welcoming dissent, defining crime narrowly, heeding international criticism, avoiding even the appearance of demagoguery, and yes – shrinking government and cutting regulation. And given the documented dangers of politicians’ power-lust, that is just what anyone who cares about human welfare should be hoping for.

May 1, 2019

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Power-Hunger.” *EconLog*, March 2, 2017.

They Know Better

Moral reasoning is hard. It's so hard, in fact, that most people do little moral reasoning. Instead, as Daniel Kahneman would expect, they perform a mental substitution.¹ Rather than wonder, "What's morally right?," they ask, "What's socially acceptable?"

In decent societies, this seems fairly harmless. When your society is even selectively evil, however, the substitution is disastrous. Strictly following standard social norms in Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, or Maoist China is murder.²

Which brings us to a pressing question: How do you *know* whether your society is evil? Or to make matters even starker: How hard was it for the average adult in Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, or Maoist China to know that *their* societies were evil? If people can't readily figure that out on their own, what moral questions *can* they answer?

My claim: Figuring out that Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and Maoist China are evil is an easy task for almost anyone – including lifelong members of those societies. How so? By applying two principles that a child can understand.

Principle #1: Turnaround. When one child mistreats another, adults routinely ask the offender something like, "Would it be all right if someone did that to *you*?" When you're faced with complex moral hypotheticals, this

question won't get you far. But when you're wondering, "Is it all right to murder some peaceful but unpopular people?," you really can fast forward to the right answer just by asking, "If you were a Jew/kulak/money-lender, would it be all right to murder you?"

Principle #2: Bad laws are made to be broken. Virtually everyone in every society regularly breaks the law – and they usually do so with a clean conscience.³ This is clearly true when the law inflicts great suffering for no good reason. Yet people also routinely break laws simply because the laws are obviously stupid. A few people may claim to "Always follow the law," but even these stubborn folk spend little time actually studying the laws to ensure they don't accidentally break one. Neither do they feel guilty about their lackadaisical effort to master the body of laws they're nominally determined to strictly obey. And since people already break the law to cut a few minutes off their commute, the idea that they should disobey laws ordering the murder of Jews/kulaks/money-lenders is only an intellectual baby step.

None of this means that ordinary people in Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, or Maoist China were morally obliged to die as martyrs. However, it does mean ordinary people in these societies could easily figure out that their societies were deeply evil – and they should at least have covertly strived to avoid complicity. If they failed to figure that out, it is because they culpably failed to apply moral principles they understood since childhood.

The moral standards for people who actually formed and carried out these policies were, of course, much higher. I've quoted Spiderman before and I'll quote him again: With great power comes great responsibility. Ordinary people have no obligation to devote their lives to the study of

moral philosophy and social science. But anyone who wields political power over thousands of human beings – much less millions – absolutely does.

October 10, 2019

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Eureka! Economic Illiteracy as Mental Substitution.” *EconLog*, January 10, 2012.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Mao Is Murder.” *EconLog*, October 9, 2019.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “The Righteous Scofflaw.” *EconLog*, April 8, 2014.

Monopolize the Pretty Lies

Why do dictators deny people the right to speak freely? The obvious response is, “The truth hurts.” Dictators are bad, so if people can freely speak the truth, they will say bad things about the dictator. This simultaneously wounds dictators’ pride and threatens their power, so dictators declare war on the truth.

But is this story right? Consider: If you want to bring an incumbent dictator down, do you really want to be hamstrung by the truth? It’s far easier – and more crowd-pleasing – to respond to a pack of official lies with your own pack of lies. When the dictator claims, “I’ve made this the greatest country on earth,” you could modestly respond, “Face facts: we’re only 87th.” Yet if it’s power you seek, you might as well lie back, “The dictator has *destroyed* our country – but this *will* be the greatest country on earth if *we* gain power.” Even more obviously, if the current dictator claims the sanction of God, the opposition doesn’t want to shrug, “Highly improbable. How do you even know God exists?” Instead, the opposition wants to roar, “No, God is on *our* side. Our side!”

What then is the primary purpose of censorship? It’s not to suppress the truth – which has little mass appeal anyway. The primary purpose of censorship is to monopolize the pretty lies. *Only* the powers-that-be can freely make absurdly self-aggrandizing claims. Depending on the severity

of the despotism, you may not have to echo the official lies. But if you publicly defend alternative absurdly self-aggrandizing claims, the powers-that-be will crush you.

Why, though, do dictators so eagerly seek to monopolize the pretty lies? In order to take full advantage of their subjects' Social Desirability Bias. Human beings like to say – and think – whatever superficially sounds good.¹ Strict censorship allows rulers to exploit this deep mental flaw. If no one else can make absurd lies, a trite slogan like, "Let's unite to fight for a fantastic future!" carries great force. Truthful critics would have to make crowd-displeasing objections like, "Maybe competition will bring us a brighter future than unity," "Who exactly are we fighting?," or "Precisely how fantastic of a future are we talking about?" A rather flaccid bid for power! Existing rulers tremble far more when rebels bellow, "Join us to fight for a fantastic future!"

George Orwell has been a huge influence on me. When you read his political novels, you often get the feeling that dictators fear the truth above all. If only Winston Smith could take over the Ministry of Truth and tell all Oceania that it needlessly lives in poverty and fear. In the broad scheme of things, however, unvarnished truth is only a minor threat to tyranny. After all, rulers could respond to the ironclad fact with a pile of demagoguery: "Smith is slandering our great country!" "He's a willing tool of Eurasia!" Or even, "We're not rich because the greatest country in the world is too proud to sell itself." The real threat to the regime would be a rival set of demagogues offering Utopia after a brief bloodbath sends a few wicked, treasonous leaders straight to the hell that they so richly deserve.

Doesn't this imply that free speech is overrated? Yes; I've said so before.² While I'd like to believe that free speech leads naturally to the

triumph of truth, I see little sign of this. Instead, politics looks to me like a Great Liars’ War. Viable politicians defy literal truth in virtually every sentence.³ They defy it with hyperbole. They defy it with overconfidence. They defy it with wishful thinking. Dictators try to make One Big Political Lie mandatory. Free speech lets a Thousand Political Lies Bloom.

Yes, freedom of speech lets me make these dour observations without fear. I’m grateful for that. Yet outside my Bubble, dour observations fall on deaf ears.⁴ Psychologically normal humans crave pretty lies, so the Great Liars’ War never ends.

September 11, 2019

Notes

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3. Caplan, Bryan. “Hypocrisy and Hyperbole.” *EconLog*, March 11, 2019.
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II

A Litany of Evil

Only the Rich

The government gives an excludable good away for free: roads, parks, education, medicine, whatever. Then some economist advocates privatization of one of these freebies. Technocrats may offer some technical objections to privatization. Normal people, however, will respond with a disgusted rhetorical question: “So *only the rich* should have roads/parks/education/medicine/whatever.”

A straw man? Not really. As I’ve explained, a straw man is when you falsely attribute a silly argument to your opponents.¹ But “Only the rich...” is an argument the opponents of privatization routinely embrace.

But what exactly is so silly about the “only the rich” argument?

1. Some free government services would remain quite affordable after privatization. These goods certainly wouldn’t “only be for the rich.” This is especially clear if (a) government subsidies are currently driving up prices or (b) privatization paves the way for broad-based tax cuts.
2. Suppose that after privatization, the formerly free goods become quite pricey. The non-rich could still afford them by *making their purchase a priority*. In the current regime, for example, boats are pretty expensive. But many people of modest means still own boats because they make boat ownership a priority, sacrificing other goods and services to free

up funds for the activity they intensely value. Prioritizing is especially effective in the long run because motivated people can and do save money to build up a nest egg.

3. The market often offers expensive full-price products and affordable substitutes side-by-side. In a free market, for example, driving during peak time would probably be very expensive. But tolls earlier or later in the day would be far cheaper.
4. If they plan ahead, the non-rich can often afford extremely expensive products by buying insurance. Even if the rates aren't cheap, insurance is the classic way to transform devastating financial shocks into manageable financial burdens.
5. Where all else fails, the non-rich can turn to borrowing and charity.
6. Intelligent critics are likely to blame me for being overly literal. Of course "Only the rich will have X" is hyperbole.² But it's a poetic way to lament the inequities of the market mechanism. But I say the intelligent critics are interpreting populist rhetoric far too charitably.

If literally true, the hyperbolic arguments would be powerful objections to privatization. If privatization will genuinely deprive all non-rich people of all medicine, we probably shouldn't privatize. But if the worst you can say about privatization is, "Rich people will have more and better medicine," the obvious retorts are: "Rich people *already* have more and better medicine," followed by "That's the whole point of money – to get more and better stuff."

In short, the "Only the rich" catchphrase isn't merely a childish overstatement. Like most political hyperbole, it's effective because adults take it literally. As I've said before:

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.³

What would it take to transform “only the rich” populist demagoguery into serious policy analysis?⁴ Simple: Critics of the market could argue that the marginal improvement in incentives isn’t worth the marginal costs of higher inequality. Of course, once you frame the issue that way, it’s a short jump from critic to agnostic.

December 28, 2017

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Straw Men Rule.” *EconLog*, December 3, 2015.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Apolitical Reasons to Hate Politics.” *EconLog*, September 27, 2016.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “What’s Libertarian About Betting?” *EconLog*, September 30, 2015.
4. Caplan, Bryan. “Making Populism Serious: The Case of Social Security.” *EconLog*, August 16, 2012.

Phase-In: A Demagogic Theory of the Minimum Wage

Increases in the minimum wage are usually “phased-in.” Instead of raising the minimum wage overnight, the law usually specifies a series of steps. The Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2007 increased the prior \$5.15 minimum wage in three steps:

...to \$5.85 per hour 60 days after enactment (2007-07-24), to \$6.55 per hour 12 months after that (2008-07-24), and finally to \$7.25 per hour 12 months after that (2009-07-24)...

Ron Unz’s proposed increase, similarly, has two steps.¹ In his own words:

The initiative is targeted for the November 2014 ballot. If it passed early in 2015, the minimum wage in California will go up to \$10 an hour; early in 2016 it would be raised to \$12 an hour. In other words, the initiative in a couple of stages would raise the minimum wage of all California workers to \$12 an hour.

What’s the point of these byzantine timetables? Why not just *immediately* impose the minimum wage you actually want? On the surface, the steps seem like an implicit admission that *sharply and suddenly* raising the

minimum wage would have the negative disemployment effects emphasized by its critics.² The point of the steps, then, is to turn a dangerously sharp and sudden hike into a harmlessly slow and gradual hike.

On reflection, though, this argument makes very little sense. Giving people more time to adjust to incentives normally leads to *larger* adjustments, not smaller ones. If you suddenly raise the gas tax, for example, there is very little effect on gas consumption. But if people *expect* the gas tax to go up years before the higher tax kicks in, many will buy more fuel-efficient cars, leading to a large behavioral response. Minimum wage hikes should work the same way: Employers' long-run response should *exceed* their short-run response. If minimum wage advocates want to minimize the disemployment effect, they should remember the old adage about ripping off a Band-Aid: One sudden pull, and you're done.

On reflection, though, there is another major difference between employers' response to sharp-and-sudden versus slow-and-gradual minimum wage hikes: visibility.

If the minimum wage unexpectedly jumped to \$12 today, the effect on employment, though relatively small, would be *blatant*. Employers would wake up with a bunch of unprofitable workers on their hands. Over the next month or two, we would blame virtually all low-skilled lay-offs on the minimum wage hike – and we'd probably be right to do so.

If everyone knew the minimum wage was going to be \$12 in 2015, however, even a large effect on employment could be virtually invisible. Employers wouldn't need to lay any workers off. They could get to their new optimum via reduced hiring and attrition.² When the law finally kicked in, you might find *zero* extra layoffs, because employers saw the writing on the wall and quietly downsized their workforce in advance.

If you sincerely cared about workers' well-being, of course, it wouldn't make any difference whether the negative side effects of the minimum wage were blatant or subtle. You'd certainly prefer small but blatant job losses to large but subtle job losses.

But what if you're a ruthless demagogue, pandering to the public's economic illiteracy in a quest for power? Then you have a clear reason to prefer the subtle to the blatant. If you raise the minimum wage to \$12 today and low-skilled unemployment doubles overnight, even the benighted masses might connect the dots. A gradual phase-in is a great insurance policy against a public relations disaster. As long as the minimum wage takes years to kick in, any half-competent demagogue can find dozens of appealing scapegoats for the unemployment of low-skilled workers.

Most non-economists never even consider the possibility that the minimum wage could reduce employment. Before I studied economics, I was one of these oblivious non-economists.³ But if minimum wage activists were as clueless as the typical non-economist, they wouldn't bother with phase-in. They'd go full speed ahead. The fact that activists' proposals include phase-in provisions, therefore, suggests that for all their bluster, they know that negative effects on employment are a serious possibility. If they really cared about low-skilled workers, they'd struggle to figure out the magnitude of the effect. Instead, they cleverly make the disemployment effect of the minimum wage too gradual to detect.

December 5, 2013

Notes

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2. Meer, Jonathan, and West, Jeremy. “Effects of the Minimum Wage on Employment Dynamics.” *NBER*, August 1, 2013.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “Who Loves Bastiat and Who Loves Him Not.” *EconLog*, August 15, 2012.

Self-Help vs. Power-Hunger

I was once on an NPR panel on “Capitalism” with a pair of self-identified socialists – Kristen Ghodsee and Vivek Chibber. The hosts asked us a wide range of questions, including several of the form: “What would you say to a person with problem X?” For example, they played a statement from someone who really disliked her job as a COVID nurse. What should she do?

Literalist that I am, I tried to offer helpful, relevant advice. I started with the First Law of Wing-Walking: Keep your current job, but intensively search for a better position.¹ As I’ve explained before:

Happily settle for your first tolerable job offer... but only temporarily. Once you’re secure in your new position, at least keep your eyes open for a better opportunity. Something’s bound to come along eventually – and when it does, you can bargain with confidence.

Better yet, virtually any job yields valuable experience and career connections. As a result, you have more than happenstance on your side. Month after month, year after year, the odds tilt more and more in your favor – especially if you strive to impress your whole social network with your professionalism.

Since the unhappy nurse disliked her irregular hours, I pointed out the wide range of nursing positions. Some nurses have totally regular hours in a doctor's office or school. Others pull all-nighters at the ER. Switching from one track to another takes time, but with determination and flexibility, any qualified nurse can probably pull it off in a matter of months.

The socialist panelists, in contrast, bizarrely claimed that such efforts were hopeless, and told the nurse that left-wing political activism and/or unionization were the only viable remedies. When I pointed out that such methods are notoriously *ineffective* (when they don't lead to total disaster), they doubled down. I pressed them further. If a young family member asked for career advice, would they seriously tell them that self-help is futile and steer them toward collective action instead? As far as I recall, my counterparts refused to engage in this challenge.

Late in the interview, one of the hosts asked something like, "Is belief in the efficacy of self-help the fundamental difference between you?" The socialists quickly affirmed that it was. I probably just said, "It is *one* important difference." After the recording session ended, however, this issue stayed in my mind. Any individual obviously has the power to unilaterally *mess up* their own lives. Just become a violent drunk on the job for a day and watch your career die. How then can you imagine that the opposite path of self-improvement is a waste of time?

After a few days, however, the tension between socialism and self-help became clear.

Suppose you're very power-hungry.² Do you want people to think they're able to fix their own problems? Of course not. If individuals can help themselves by doing a good job, learning new skills, making friends, and keeping their eyes peeled, what do they need *you* for? In contrast, if

people believe that collective action is the path forward, the collectivity will clearly need leaders. And who will fill these leadership positions? The socialist activists, naturally.

Yes, this is a lurid picture: Power-hungry pundits push the absurd position that collective action is more likely to succeed than self-help – and then get to rule whatever collectivity they manage to inspire. How many socialists consciously embrace this master plan? Since I lack telepathy, I honestly don't know. Still, the frequency with which bleeding-heart socialists become bloodthirsty tyrants reassures me that I'm not paranoid.³

June 22, 2021

Notes

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2. Caplan, Bryan. “Power-Hunger.” *EconLog*, March 2, 2017.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “Could Such a Man Care?” *EconLog*, May 1, 2019. ;
Caplan, Bryan. “Socialism: The Failed Idea that Never Dies.” *EconLog*, December 23, 2019.

The Banality of Leninism

Historians often act like Lenin's tyranny was a bolt from the blue: Who would have expected a bunch of socialists to be so bloodthirsty? Admirers of Lenin, in contrast, often paint him as a great innovator – at least as a strategist. A dictatorship of the proletariat run by a vanguard party of bourgeois intellectuals? Only Lenin could have conceived it. When you read 19th-century Russian literature, however, “Leninist” memes clearly predate the birth of Lenin. Contrary to many historians, Lenin's atrocities were foreseeable. And contrary to Lenin's admirers, his strategy of atrocity was pure cliche.

Consider this scene from *Crime and Punishment*, first published four years before Lenin's birth in 1870. Detective Porfiry Petrovich discovers that Dostoyevsky's protagonist-murderer Raskolnikov published an article on the philosophy of crime:

“In his article all men are divided into ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary.’ Ordinary men have to live in submission, have no right to transgress the law, because, don’t you see, they are ordinary. But extraordinary men have a right to commit any crime and to transgress the law in any way, just because they are extraordinary. That was your idea, if I am not mistaken?”...

Raskolnikov has a long-winded but lucid reply:

..."That wasn't quite my contention," he began simply and modestly. "Yet I admit that you have stated it almost correctly; perhaps, if you like, perfectly so." (It almost gave him pleasure to admit this.) "The only difference is that I don't contend that extraordinary people are always bound to commit breaches of morals, as you call it. In fact, I doubt whether such an argument could be published. I simply hinted that an 'extraordinary' man has the right ...that is not an official right, but an inner right to decide in his own conscience to overstep ...certain obstacles, and only in case it is essential for the practical fulfillment of his idea (sometimes, perhaps, of benefit to the whole of humanity)... I maintain that if the discoveries of Kepler and Newton could not have been made known except by sacrificing the lives of one, a dozen, a hundred, or more men, Newton would have had the right, would indeed have been in duty bound ...to eliminate the dozen or the hundred men for the sake of making his discoveries known to the whole of humanity. But it does not follow from that that Newton had a right to murder people right and left and to steal every day in the market...

What does this have to do with revolutionary politics? Everything.

Raskolnikov continues:

I maintain in my article that all ...well, legislators and leaders of men, such as Lycurgus, Solon, Mahomet, Napoleon, and so on, were all without exception criminals, from the very fact that, making a new law, they transgressed the ancient one, handed down from their

ancestors and held sacred by the people, and they did not stop short at bloodshed either, if that bloodshed — often of innocent persons fighting bravely in defense of ancient law — were of use to their cause. It's remarkable, in fact, that the majority, indeed, of these benefactors and leaders of humanity were guilty of terrible carnage. In short, I maintain that all great men or even men a little out of the common, that is to say capable of giving some new word, must from their very nature be criminals — more or less, of course.

The argument is typically Leninist:

1. Hasty, dogmatic acceptance of utilitarianism.
2. Eager, poetic embrace of the implication that mass murder is *conceivably* morally justified; indeed, morally required.
3. Praising the “extraordinary men” who answer the call of sanguinary duty.

More tellingly, if you read the entire chapter, you'll notice two typically Leninist omissions:

1. Even a token effort to show that any specific policy change would in fact have extremely good consequences.
2. Even a token effort to argue that well-targeted “terrible carnage” would greatly improve the probability of these policy changes being adopted.

The key difference between a normal utilitarian and a Leninist: When a normal utilitarian concludes that mass murder would maximize social utility, he *checks his work!* He goes over his calculations with a fine-tooth comb, hoping to discover a way to implement beneficial policy changes

without horrific atrocities. The Leninist, in contrast, reasons backward from the atrocities that emotionally inspire him to the utilitarian argument that morally justifies his atrocities.

If this seems woefully uncharitable, compare the amount of time a proto-Leninist like Raskolnikov spends lovingly reviewing the mere conceivability of morally justified bloodbaths to the amount of time he spends (a) empirically evaluating the effects of policies or (b) searching for less brutal ways to implement whatever policies he wants. These ratios are typical for the entire Russian radical tradition; it's what they imagined to be "profound." When men like this gained power in Russia, they did precisely what you'd expect: treat mass murder like a panacea. This is the banality of Leninism.

March 19, 2012

“Socialism”: The Provocative Equivocation

The socialists are back, but is it a big deal? It’s tempting to say that it’s purely rhetorical. Modern socialists don’t want to emulate the Soviet Union. To them, socialism just means “Sweden,” right? Even if their admiration for Sweden is unjustified, we’ve long known that the Western world contains millions of people who want their countries to be like Sweden.¹ Why should we care if Sweden-fans rebrand themselves as “socialists”?

My instinctive objection is that even using the term “socialism” is an affront to the many millions of living victims of Soviet-style totalitarian regimes. Talking about “socialism” understandably horrifies them. Since there are plenty of palatable synonyms for Swedish-type policies (starting with “Swedenism”!), selecting this particular label seems a breach of civility.

If this seems paranoid, what would you say about a new movement of self-styled “national socialists”? Even if their policy positions were moderate, this brand needlessly terrifies lots of folks who have already suffered enough.

On reflection, however, this is a weak objection. Yes, if a label’s connotations are – like “national socialism” – almost entirely horrible, then

loudly embracing the label is uncivil. “Socialism,” however, has *long* had a wide range of meanings. Even during the height of Stalinism, plenty of self-styled “socialists” were avowedly anti-Communist. The upshot: Even if you were a victim of Soviet oppression, assuming the worst when you hear the word “socialism” is hypersensitive. And hypersensitivity is bad.²

Yet there’s a much stronger reason to object to the socialist revival. Namely: It’s far from clear that the latter-day socialists *do* mean Sweden. While some (like John Marsh) plainly say so, others (like Elizabeth Bruenig) are coy indeed.³ Which raises deeply troubling questions, starting with:

1. Are latter-day socialists unaware of the history of the totalitarian movement that shares their name? Given widespread historical ignorance and the youth of the new socialists, we can hardly rule this out. A troubling thought; isn’t it negligent to champion a radical idea without investigating its history first?
2. Are latter-day socialists *ambivalent* about the totalitarian movement that shares their name? Do they look at the Soviet Union as a noble experiment with unfortunate shortcomings? How about Chavez’s Venezuela?
3. Do latter-day socialists think of Sweden as a starting point, and something more radical as the ultimate goal? Are there outright crypto-communists among them?⁴ If so, do their comrades know? Care?
4. Do latter-day socialists realize that being coy raises the preceding concerns? Do they care? Or is the raising of these concerns a “feature, not a bug”? I.e., they *enjoy* making people wonder if they’re secret Leninists?

What's the truth? While I don't personally know any latter-day socialists well, I do read a lot of articles in *The Nation*, which publishes a wide range of modern socialists. So here are my best guesses about the preceding possibilities.

1. Older socialists (age 50+) know *a lot* about the actual history of socialism. The younger ones (age 40 and under), however, know little and care less. They're negligent romantics.
2. Most historically-literate socialists are indeed ambivalent about the totalitarian movement that shares their name. Very few will defend Stalin, but they just can't stay mad at Lenin, Castro, or Ho Chi Minh. Even the historically-naive socialists feel pretty good about Cuba today and Venezuela in 2015.
3. Yes, most avowed socialists have a more radical ultimate goal than Sweden. In our Capitalism-Socialism debate, even the reasonable John Marsh mused about a future that realized radical socialist dreams without degenerating into a typical socialist nightmare. How extreme, then, are the ultimate goals of the *unreasonable* socialists? While I really don't know, I strongly suspect that Bernie Sanders is literally a crypto-communist. Even if I'm wrong, how many latter-day socialists would care if Sanders *was* a crypto-communist?
4. Latter-day socialists really do *enjoy* making people wonder about their ultimate agenda. When you read *The Nation*, for example, authors almost never specify exactly what policy should be. Instead, they focus on radical movement in the desired direction, with minimal discussion of their ultimate objective. In particular, they almost never say what would be "too far." Of course, this describes most political

movements; they want to rally the troops, not provide blueprints of an ideal world. But when you cultivate a “radical” image but withhold specifics, you should expect critics’ minds to go to dark places. Rather than try to calm the critics, the latter-day socialists court their disapproval. In fact, most seem to positively enjoy the imagined intellectual trauma they’re inflicting on the unbeliever.

On reflection, then, the return of the self-styled socialist is indeed a travesty. The reason, though, is not that the word is offensive, but that it is *deliberately* confusing. If you really thought Sweden was a model society, you would just praise Sweden. The “socialist” label, in contrast, is a *provocative equivocation*. Latter-day socialists adopt it because they would rather insinuate their possible support for totalitarian horrors than earnestly promote an intellectually defensible position.

To what end? In modern parlance, the latter-day socialists could just be trolling. This is bad enough, but *some* socialists probably sincerely believe what they’re insinuating.⁵ Or worse. If all you want is Swedish social democracy, making common cause with such socialists is a grave mistake.

May 22, 2019

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Denmark and Sweden: Expectations versus Experience.” *EconLog*, August 21, 2009.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Welcome to My Hypersensitivity Training Workshop.” *EconLog*, December 15, 2010.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “Capitalism vs. Socialism: Reply to Bruenig.” *EconLog*, March 6, 2018.
4. Caplan, Bryan. “Correction on Mandela.” *EconLog*, January 23, 2014.
5. Caplan, Bryan. “Against Trolling.” *EconLog*, April 20, 2016.

Socialists Without a Plan

If I met a four-star general and he told me he was a socialist, I'd understand where he's coming from. After all, this is a man who lives and breathes logistics. He *leads for a living*. His job is to make master plans, then carefully monitor his underlings so they actually implement said master plans. Location, timing, manpower, supplies, margins of error – a general takes all of them into account. Sure, he knows the proverb that "No plan survives first contact with the enemy." But a general still strives to craft systems that run like clockwork.

What's the socialist connection? After a lifetime of daily experience as a planner, it's easy to see why a general would be appalled to realize that our society has no plan at all. There's *got* to be a plan. And who better to give society its much-needed plan than the general and his colleagues?

Yet strangely, none of the socialists I've personal encountered has a military background. Quite the opposite. Virtually 100% of the socialists I've met are "free spirits." They live in the moment – and act from the heart. They're not the kind of people who obsess over master plans. Instead, they're the kind of people who would casually crash the best of plans with a last-minute bad hair day.

Don't get me wrong; most of the socialists I've met seem like nice people. But they radiate incompetence. I doubt their families would trust

them to plan a simple trip to Sea World. So what on Earth convinces these socialists that people like themselves should run not only the government, but the economy as well?

I'd like to offer a charitable resolution of this puzzle, but have none to offer. The socialists of today aren't experienced logisticians who fail to see the disanalogies between running an organization and running a whole society. They're dreamers who want to lead before they learn to follow. So while I'd gladly give a socialist general a lecture on the economics of socialism, today's typical socialist needs to hear a simpler message: They should learn to make solid mundane plans for their own lives before they think about imposing grandiose plans on the rest of the world.

October 31, 2018

Is Bernie Sanders a Crypto-Communist?

A Bayesian Analysis

The word “crypto-communist” has a paranoid, McCarthyite connotation. But during the Cold War, numerous communist intellectuals and politicians deliberately concealed their commitment to Marxism-Leninism. Why? To be more successful intellectuals and politicians. A few crypto-communists even managed to become national leaders. Fidel Castro gained power in 1959 but only announced his communism in 1961. Nelson Mandela presented himself as a reasonable democratic reformer. Yet after his death, the African National Congress openly admitted that Mandela had been on the politburo of the South African Communist Party for decades.¹ Ho Chi Minh joined the Communist Party in 1920, but in 1945 he loudly posed as a moderate democratic reformer – famously quoting the U.S. Declaration of Independence to charm the West. Juan Negrín, the last prime minister of Republican Spain, was also very likely a crypto-communist.

Which brings me to my question: What about Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders? Is *he* a crypto-communist? Sanders has sent decades worth of frightening signals – praising Soviet bloc regimes, honeymooning in the Soviet Union, and such. Indeed, he’s said and done almost exactly what you would expect a sincere Marxist-Leninist who

wanted to be a U.S. Senator would say and do. Note, moreover, that Sanders came of political age during the 60s and 70s when communism made a big comeback in the U.S. radical left.

True, this hardly proves that he's a closeted communist. Alternately, Sanders could be a communist dupe or even a true believer in "finding the good in the bad." The upshot: We have to settle for a *probability* that Sanders is a crypto-communist, all things considered.

When constructing such probabilities, Bayes' Rule is usually helpful. As you may recall, the Rule states that: $P(A|B) = P(B|A) * P(A) / [P(B|A) * P(A) + P(B|\sim A) * P(\sim A)]$. In this case, we want to know the probability that (A) Sanders is a crypto-communist given (B) his track record. Piece-by-piece:

1. What's the probability of Sanders' track record if he *is* a crypto-communist? Here, I'd go high. Most crypto-communists in Sanders' position would look like him. I give this 75%.
2. What's the probability of Sanders' track record if he *isn't* a crypto-communist? Sanders's views have long been extremely unpopular, but quite a few non-communists on the radical left would have shared them. So I'll give this 1.2%.
3. What's the prior probability of being a crypto-communist? Even during the 60s and 70s, this would be low, but not astronomically low. .3% seems plausible.
4. What's the prior probability of not being a crypto-communist? $100\% - .3\% = 99.7\%$.

Plugging into Bayes' Rule, I get 15.8% – a low but hardly negligible risk that Sanders is totalitarian hiding in plain sight. Needless to say, you can alter this final estimate by fiddling with the value of the numerical

components. But you'd have to change them a lot to get the probability below 5%.

Which brings us to a big related question: When does the risk of crypto-communism become disqualifying for a presidential candidate? I say even a 1% chance should be totally disqualifying, but I fear that most Democrats – and many non-Democrats – will demur. So what risk would they consider acceptable? 5%? 10%? I don't know, but plausibly revising (1)-(4) to get below a 5% or 10% threshold is no easy feat.

January 29, 2020

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Correction on Mandela.” *EconLog*, January 23, 2014.

The One Blameworthy Lifestyle

People are often taken aback when I argue that the First World's poor are usually undeserving. In modern political discussion, we're supposed to "propose solutions," not point fingers. Even when we're talking about politically connected banks, we usually discuss alternate policies rather than denouncing particular banks or bankers.

Yet there's one notable exception to this rule: our political opponents. When liberals discuss conservatives or conservatives discuss liberals, the language of blame prevails. Invective is abundant. "Solutions" are in short supply. It's almost as if people think that opposing their political view is the *only* blameworthy lifestyle.

Paul Krugman is far from the only offender, but he's a great example. When Krugman discusses banking regulation, fiscal policy, poverty, or the Iraq War, he's got a blueprint for reform.¹ He may be mildly peeved at some of the factions named in his blueprints. But the only people that outrage him are his blueprints' conscious political opponents.

I understand why *I* blame my political opponents. I blame people very freely. I blame people for being impulsive, lazy, conformist, stubborn, hot-tempered, hostile, and naive. I blame people for being too dogmatic. I blame them for being so open-minded their brains fall out of their heads. I blame people for being bad spouses.² I blame people for selecting bad

spouses. It's hardly surprising, then, that I blame my political opponents for being irrational, for being statists, for being war-mongers, for failing to recognize the rights of strangers.³

I can understand why someone would reject my whole perspective. Most obviously, if determinism were true, then moral blame would never be justified.* What I can't understand, though, is why people single out their political opponents as *uniquely* blameworthy. If it's OK to blame Republicans for being bigoted apologists for plutocracy, why is it wrong to blame people for credulously accepting the religion their parents teach them to believe? If it's OK to blame Democrats for being envious crypto-socialists, why is it wrong to blame alcoholics for drinking irresponsibly?

Inquiring minds want to know. I promise to hold all answers blameless.

* Indeed, if determinism were true, it would be unjustified to morally blame me for morally blaming others! Of course, a utilitarian determinist could affirm a duty to *feign* moral blame for its deterrent effect; what determinism rules out is *epistemically* justified moral blame.

September 3, 2012

Notes

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2. Caplan, Bryan. “The Rotten Spouse Theorem.” *EconLog*, October 17, 2011.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “The Stranger.” *EconLog*, January 24, 2011.

Blame the Republicans

When I blame people for their problems, Democrats and liberals are prone to object at a fundamental level.¹ One fundamental objection rests on determinism: Since everyone is determined to act precisely as he does, it is *always* false to say, “There were reasonable steps he could have taken to avoid his problem.” Another fundamental objection rests on utilitarianism: We should always do whatever maximizes social utility, even if that means taxing the blameless to subsidize the blameworthy.

Strangely, though, every Democrat and liberal I know routinely blames *one* category of people for their vicious choices: Republicans. Watch their Facebook feeds. You’ll see story after story about how Republicans – leaders and followers – shirk their basic moral duties. Republicans ignore their duty to help the less fortunate. Republicans ignore scientific evidence on global warming. Republicans lie to foment war. The point of these claims is not merely that Republican policies have bad consequences, but that Republicans are blameworthy people.

The underlying logic is rarely stated, but it snaps neatly into my framework of blame.² Why are Republicans blameworthy? *Because there are reasonable steps they could have taken to avoid being what they are.* Instead of ignoring their duties to help the less fortunate, Republicans could show basic humanity. Instead of ignoring scientific evidence on global

warming, Republicans could calmly defer to the climatological consensus. Instead of lying to foment war, Republicans could tell the truth.

Are these “reasonable” alternatives? Sure. This is clearly true for the Republican rank-and-file. Since one vote has a near-zero chance of noticeably changing political outcomes, political virtue is effectively free. Asking the typical Republicans to reverse course on global warming isn’t like asking him to unilaterally give up his car. It’s like asking him for a one-penny donation. Totally reasonable.

The same goes for Republican leaders. Yes, a successful Republican politician who broke ranks with his party would probably lose his job. But he could easily find alternative employment that *didn’t* require him to spurn the poor, scoff at climate science, and makeup stories about WMDs. Stop heinous activity, keep your upper-middle-class lifestyle. Quite reasonable.

I’m tempted to dispute (some of) liberals’ underlying factual claims here. But I won’t. Instead, I’ll just point out that blaming Republicans is incompatible with any *fundamental* rejection of the notion of blame. Blaming Republicans is incompatible with the determinist rejection of blame: If Republicans, like all humans “just can’t help what they do,” how can you blame them for scoffing at the IPCC? Blaming Republicans is incompatible with the utilitarian rejection of blame: If we should always do whatever maximizes social utility, blaming Republicans is just an irrelevant excuse for public policies that fail to take Republicans’ feelings into account. Blaming Republicans is an existence theorem; if blaming Republicans is justified, blaming people is sometimes justified.

Personally, I strongly favor blaming Republicans. I think 80% of the blame heaped on Republicans is justified.³ What mystifies me, however, is the view that Republicans are somehow *uniquely* blameworthy. If you can

blame Republicans for lying about WMDs, why can't you blame alcoholics for lying to their families about their drinking? If you can blame Republican leaders for supporting bad policies because they don't feel like searching for another job, why can't you blame able-bodied people on disability because they don't feel like searching for another job?

Democrats and liberals who expand their willingness to blame do face a risk: You will occasionally sound like a Republican! But why is that such a big deal? Maybe you'll lose a few intolerant hard-left friends, but they're replaceable. By taking a reasonable step – broadening your blame – you can avoid the vices of moral inconsistency and moral nepotism. To do anything less would be... blameworthy.

March 10, 2014

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. "Poverty: The Stages of Blame Applied." *EconLog*, March 6, 2014.
2. Caplan, Bryan. "How Deserving Are the Poor?: My Opening Statement." *EconLog*, February 2, 2012.
3. Caplan, Bryan. "How Dems and Reps Differ: Against the Conventional Wisdom." *EconLog*, September 7, 2008.

What We Would Now Know, If Demagogues Didn't Rule Every Country on Earth

About six months after the rise of COVID-19, humanity still doesn't know the answers to a long list of critical questions. Questions like:

1. What is the true Infection Fatality Rate (IFR)?
2. What fraction of the population has COVID-19 now?
3. What fraction of the population has already had it?
4. How does the IFR really vary by age, gender, and prior health status?
5. How much immunity to COVID-19 do recovered patients acquire?
6. What are the odds of contracting the disease indoors versus outdoors?
From asymptomatic carriers?
7. How much does infection probability fall as social distance rises from 3 feet to 20 feet?
8. What are the odds of fomite transmission?
9. How much does viral load affect infection severity?

Yet amazingly, we have a straightforward and ethically unimpeachable way to decisively answer all of these questions – and countless more. The method is: *paid voluntary human experimentation*.

Experimentation is vital because it is the core of the scientific method.

Human experimentation is vital because we want to know the effects of COVID-19 on humans.

Voluntary human experimentation is vital because we are not comic-book villains.

Paid voluntary human experimentation is vital because there is a massive supply of people willing to risk their lives for large cash payments, but relatively few heroes who are willing to risk their lives for free.

How would paid voluntary human experimentation work? To find the true IFR, you recruit a thousand volunteers, test them for coronavirus and coronavirus antibodies, deliberately infect half of the never-infected subjects, and then compare the death rates for the two groups. Morbid? Callous? No more morbid or callous than paying people to fight in a war, mine coal, or cut down trees. The social value of the knowledge is immense, they knowingly accepted the risk, and they were paid for their efforts. Deaths along the way are unfortunate but in no way blameworthy.

To find the risk of fomite infection, similarly, first measure fomite levels in, say, eleven grocery stores. Then recruit a thousand volunteers, randomly send half of them to the median store to shop for an hour, quarantine all of them for two weeks, then compare the infection rate for the two groups.

Finding the true infection rate isn't quite as clean, admittedly. But you can still randomly offer citizens a lot of money to participate in the study until you get 90 or 95% participation. Then measure prevalence. Way better than even Iceland has done so far.

You get the idea. So why isn't paid voluntary human experimentation already a reality? You could claim that none of the preceding questions

matter for policy, but that is madness itself. The value of accurately measuring disease parameters is rationally unassailable.

You could say, “Well, it’s just not ethical.” This, too, is madness itself. Life entails the risk of death. We routinely let people voluntarily risk their lives for trivial gains, like the pleasure of climbing Mount Everest. So it is crazy to forbid people to assume risks with astronomical social value.

You could say, “Well, our government is too messed up to do the right thing.” But that still doesn’t explain why *no* country is going full-speed ahead with paid voluntary human experimentation. Even poor, backward countries could have scrounged up the money for paid voluntary human experimentation, perhaps outsourcing the analysis to a richer country.

So how come no one has done as I advise? Because every country on Earth is ruled by demagogues – power-lusters who would rather watch hundreds of thousands die rather than defy popular but absurd scruples.¹ Don’t tell me, “Leaders’ hands are tied.” Leaders around the world have figured out how to legally rationalize a long list of absurd power grabs. But they can’t figure out how to legally rationalize something that makes perfect sense?!

Back in 2015, Trump, speaking in the third person, said, “Donald J. Trump is calling for a complete and total shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what the hell is going on.” Neither he nor any other world leader is serious about figuring out what the hell is going on with coronavirus. If they were, paid voluntary human experimentation would have started months ago on a massive scale – and we’d have the answers we need today.

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Speech of Heroes.” *EconLog*, January 9, 2020.

Behavioral Geneticists versus Policy Implications

In most disciplines, experts *oversell* their ability to give useful policy advice. In behavioral genetics, however, experts strangely *undersell* their ability to give useful policy advice. Here's a striking passage from Plomin, DeFries, McClearn, and McGuffin's leading behavioral genetics textbook:

The idea of genetic contribution to g has produced controversy in the media, especially following the 1994 publication of *The Bell Curve* by Herrnstein and Murray (1994). In fact, these authors scarcely touched on genetics and did not view genetic evidence as crucial to their arguments. In the first half of the book, they showed, like many other studies, that g is related to educational and social outcomes. In the second half, however, they attempted to argue that certain conservative policies follow from the findings. But, as discussed in Chapter 18, public policy never necessarily follows from scientific findings; and on the basis of the same studies, it would be possible to present arguments that are the opposite of those of Herrnstein and Murray.

Logically speaking, the textbook is right. The germ theory of disease doesn't necessarily imply that we should wash our hands more. A misanthrope could "on the basis of the same studies" argue against hand-washing because he wants people to suffer and die.

My complaint: Plomin et al. are setting up a straw man. Policy analysts almost *never* argue that public policies "necessarily follow" from scientific findings. Instead, they argue that public policies follow scientific findings *combined with* some moral principles. They usually try, moreover, to reason from relatively uncontroversial moral principles like cost-benefit analysis in order to persuade a broad audience.

The interesting question, then, isn't "Do the scientific findings in this book necessarily imply any policies?" The answer to that question is "no" for all sciences and all policies. The interesting question for a behavioral genetics textbook is rather, "Do the scientific findings in this book *combined with the moral principles that policy analysts routinely use* imply any policies?"

The answer to the latter question is definitely "yes." I've discussed an obvious example before: When you ignore IQ, you overstate the marginal effect of other variables.¹ The result: Cost-benefit analysis that ignores IQ makes educational investments look more favorable than they really are. Herrnstein and Murray weren't just arguing for "certain conservative policies"; they were arguing for those policies using the standard rules of the policy analysis game.

So why are behavioral geneticists so eager to downplay the practical relevance of their field? The most plausible explanation is that these scientists already have enough trouble with political correctness. They don't

want to amplify their public relations problem by pointing out that their science undermines a bunch of popular, feel-good policies.

Critics of behavioral genetics are prone to hyperbole, but they do have good reason to fear this science. It really does undermine a lot of their sacred cows. Example: If differences in talent – not differences in opportunities – explain the intergenerational income correlation, people with normal values will conclude that a lot of redistribution is unjustified.² “Giving everyone a chance to realize his potential,” isn’t the *only* rationale for redistribution, but it is an important one. If people admitted that the family environment has little effect on economic success in our society, there is every reason to expect a decline in support for redistributive policies.

Admittedly, the critics of behavioral genetics could reply, “We want our current level of redistribution (or more!) no matter what the science says.” But they don’t *want* to say that, because it makes them sound like dogmatic ideologues. The upshot: Behavioral genetics makes its politically-correct critics angry because the scientists are putting the politically correct in an awkward position: Deny the science, abandon some of their favorite policies, or sound like dogmatic ideologues. It’s no wonder that they’re angry – and no wonder that they deny the science. They’re not just making the best of a bad situation; they’re also getting a little revenge on the researchers responsible for their unpleasant predicament.

June 8, 2009

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Does It Matter If IQ Matters?” *EconLog*, October 1, 2005.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “It’s Not Who You Know, It’s Who You Are.” *EconLog*, May 15, 2009.

Misanthropy by Numbers

Suppose you're a self-doubting misanthrope.¹ You want to malign a group of people, but don't feel up to the job. I'm here to help. If you stick to the following four easy steps, you can and will craft a rhetorically effective case against those who displease you.

Step 1: *List as many negatives as possible.* Start by rattling off all of the popular complaints against your chosen group. Then brainstorm. *Don't* bother quantifying your complaints. Even if you have scary numbers, it's more rhetorically effective to spend your energy lengthening your list than fleshing out details.

Step 2: *Studiously ignore all positives – or twist them into negatives.* Listing positives, then refuting them, is more trouble than it's worth. When you enumerate negatives, most listeners will be too lazy to devise their own objections. Yet when you enumerate positives, most listeners will be too lazy to follow *your* objections. The ideal approach, though, is to twist positives into negatives. If the maligned group is hard-working, call them “coolies” or “helots.” If they’re respectful, call them “slavish” or “docile.” If they’re frugal, call them “greedy” or “cheap.” If they raise property values, say “They’re making housing unaffordable.” This makes lazy listeners feel like you’ve covered all your bases and deprives your opponents of their best arguments.

Step 3: Ignore all remedies other than exclusion, expulsion, and extermination. Every specific problem has many specific conceivable remedies. But if you've followed Steps 1 and 2, most listeners will barely remember your specific complaints. All they'll know is that your target group is awful. And if a group is sufficiently awful, "getting rid of them" is the obvious one-stop solution. In relatively civilized countries, this means keeping the maligned out or sending them back where they came from. In relatively uncivilized countries, this means discouraging the fertility of the maligned or actually killing them. (If you don't mind a little cognitive dissonance, you can enslave them instead).

Step 4: Ignore the welfare of the maligned group, or the possibility that the maligned might have valid complaints against you. If you've followed Steps 1 and 2, listeners will have little sympathy for the maligned group. Anyone who inquires about the well-being of the maligned will seem "soft on awfulness." Indeed, even the most draconian actions on your part will seem like self-defense.²

Warning: These techniques are likely to backfire unless your audience already finds your target group somewhat annoying. In the modern United States, low-skilled immigrants, Muslims, and Arabs are the only promising candidates. But don't despair. In other times and places, misanthropes have used these four steps to malign Jews and Germans, blacks and whites, rich and poor, even intellectuals and illiterates. Misanthropes who hone their skills and bide their time may yet realize their dreams.

June 4, 2013

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “I Was a Teenage Misanthrope.” *EconLog*, May 1, 2013.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Group-Serving Bias: *Bloodlands* Edition.” *EconLog*, Nov 6, 2010.

Tell me the Difference Between Jim Crow and Immigration Restrictions

Under the Jim Crow laws, discrimination was not merely legal. It was mandatory. It was illegal for blacks to live, work, and shop in certain places. Virtually everyone today regards this as an enormous injustice. So do I. But I question the claim that modern American policy is vastly morally superior. The American government continues to mandate discrimination against an unpopular minority: illegal immigrants. And this mandatory discrimination is far harsher than anything under Jim Crow.

Most obviously:

1. Under Jim Crow, there were many places in America where blacks were not legally allowed to live. Under current immigration laws, there is *nowhere* in America where illegal immigrants are legally allowed to live.
2. Under Jim Crow, there were many jobs in America that blacks were not legally allowed to perform. Under current immigration laws, there are *no* jobs in America that illegal immigrants are legally allowed to perform.

Admittedly, immigration restrictions are not worse than Jim Crow in every possible way. Most notably:

1. Illegal immigrants face fewer restrictions on travel. *De facto*, though not *de jure*, illegal immigrants are free to use any form of transportation that doesn't require identification; they can ride trains but not planes. Under the Jim Crow laws, blacks were unable to use many forms of transportation either *de jure* or *de facto*.
2. The children of illegal immigrants face fewer restrictions on attending public school.
3. The Tuskegee Institute estimated that 3,446 blacks were lynched between 1882 and 1968 – about 40 per year. The FBI reported 681 hate crimes against Hispanics in 2010, but only one of these was a murder. Lest we feel too superior, note that according to conservative estimates, several hundred immigrants die crossing the border every year.¹

The Jim Crow laws were awful. Still, if you had to suffer under Jim Crow or modern immigration laws, Jim Crow seems like the lesser evil.

You could object that our moral obligations to citizens are far higher than our moral obligations to foreigners. But that's hardly satisfactory. After all, the essence of the segregationist position was the American blacks were *not* fully-fledged American citizens. Imagine that instead of abolishing Jim Crow laws, the American public had resolved its cognitive dissonance by simultaneously (a) stripping blacks of their citizenship, and (b) declaring that "All citizens are entitled to equal treatment." Would that have made the Jim Crow laws any less reprehensible?

Another possibility: You could say that the treatment illegal immigrants receive is an appropriate punishment for their law-breaking. This position would be plausible if legal immigration were easy. But for the typical low-

skilled immigrant, legal immigration is virtually impossible. The U.S. makes it illegal for most foreigners to live and work here *no matter what they do*. So how does the treatment they receive in any way fit their “crime”?

But perhaps I’m overlooking some crucial distinction. So tell me: What is the moral difference between Jim Crow and immigration restrictions?

March 7, 2012

Notes

1. US GAO. “GAO-06-770 Illegal Immigration: Border-Crossing Deaths Have Doubled Since 1995; Border Patrol’s Efforts to Prevent Deaths Have Not Been Fully Evaluated.” August. 2006.

Hitler's Argument for Conquest

What was Hitler's argument for attacking other countries? You might think he didn't have one, but he did. His argument is frankly Malthusian: Our population is growing, and we will run out of food unless we get more land. (My colleague David Levy tells me that Malthus wasn't a Malthusian, but that's a topic for another day!) It's all in chapter four of *Mein Kampf*:

The annual increase of population in Germany amounts to almost 900,000 souls. The difficulties of providing for this army of new citizens must grow from year to year and must finally lead to a catastrophe, unless ways and means are found which will forestall the danger of misery and hunger.

Hitler then reviews various policies to deal with the threat of overpopulation:

1. Artificial birth control. Hitler rejects this because it short-circuits natural selection. Furthermore, there is an international prisoners' dilemma: The one country that lets its numbers rise will outnumber and militarily dominate the rest:

But if that policy be carried out the final results must be that such a nation will eventually terminate its own existence on this earth; for though man may defy the eternal laws of procreation during a certain period, vengeance will follow sooner or later. A stronger race will oust that which has grown weak; for the vital urge, in its ultimate form, will burst asunder all the absurd chains of this so-called humane consideration for the individual and will replace it with the humanity of Nature, which wipes out what is weak in order to give place to the strong.

2. Increasing productivity via “internal colonization.” Hitler rejects this on a priori Malthusian grounds – there is no way for productivity to permanently outpace population growth:

It is certainly true that the productivity of the soil can be increased within certain limits; but only within defined limits and not indefinitely. By increasing the productive powers of the soil it will be possible to balance the effect of a surplus birth-rate in Germany for a certain period of time, without running any danger of hunger. But we have to face the fact that the general standard of living is rising more quickly than even the birth rate. The requirements of food and clothing are becoming greater from year to year and are out of proportion to those of our ancestors of, let us say, a hundred years ago. It would, therefore, be a mistaken view that every increase in the productive powers of the soil will supply the requisite conditions for an increase in the population.

3. Acquire new territory outside of Europe. The problem with this plan, says Hitler, is that other European countries have already taken the good non-European land. So you would have to attack European countries to get the land:

In the nineteenth century it was no longer possible to acquire such colonies by peaceful means. Therefore any attempt at such a colonial expansion would have meant an enormous military struggle. Consequently it would have been more practical to undertake that military struggle for new territory in Europe rather than to wage war for the acquisition of possessions abroad.

4. Acquire new territory inside Europe. At last, a solution to the imbalance between people and land that Hitler likes! And naturally, he doesn't contemplate buying the land:

Of course people will not voluntarily make that accommodation. At this point the right of self-preservation comes into effect. And when attempts to settle the difficulty in an amicable way are rejected the clenched hand must take by force that which was refused to the open hand of friendship. If in the past our ancestors had based their political decisions on similar pacifist nonsense as our present generation does, we should not possess more than one-third of the national territory that we possess to-day and probably there would be no German nation to worry about its future in Europe.

5. Last, Hitler briefly mentions increasing exports to buy food but dismisses it almost without consideration.

Linking views you don't like with Hitler is of course the ultimate political cheap shot. But as an economist, I don't mind buying cheap, especially if the quality is good. When someone says "There are too many Jews," we suspect that he wants to kill Jews. Similarly, it turns out that *at the root of Hitler's propensity to kill people was his belief that there are too many people.*

And if you're tempted to say that Hitler proposed a barbaric solution for a real problem, take a look at how Germany actually did feed its population since 1945: increasing agricultural productivity and increasing exports. The two methods that Hitler dismissed out of hand transformed Germany into one of the richest nations in history.

March 19, 2005

III

Pragmatic Pacifism

The Common-Sense Case for Pacifism

I used to call myself an isolationist, but I recently realized that *pacifist* is a much better description of my position.¹ All of the following definitions aptly describe what I believe:

- pacifism: The doctrine that disputes (especially between countries) should be settled without recourse to violence; the active opposition to such violence, especially the refusal to take part in military action
- pacifist: opposed to war
- pacifist: one who loves, supports, or favors peace; one who is pro-peace
- pacifist: An individual who disagrees with war on principle

Some definitions of pacifism specify opposition to all violence, even in self-defense, but these strike me as too broad. I'm a pacifist not because I *oppose* self-defense, but because it's virtually impossible to fight a war of self-defense. Even if militaries don't deliberately target innocent bystanders, they almost always wind up recklessly endangering their lives. If a policeman fought crime the way that "civilized" armies wage war, we'd put him in jail.

But isn't pacifism, in Homer Simpson's words, one of those views "with all the well-meaning rules that don't work in real life"? No. Here's my common-sense case for pacifism:

1. *The immediate costs of war are clearly awful.* Most wars lead to massive loss of life and wealth on at least one side. If you use a standard value of life of \$5M, every 200,000 deaths is equivalent to a *trillion* dollars of damage.
2. *The long-run benefits of war are highly uncertain.* Some wars – most obviously the Napoleonic Wars and World War II – at least arguably deserve credit for decades of subsequent peace. But many other wars – like the French Revolution and World War I – just sowed the seeds for new and greater horrors. You could say, “Fine, let’s only fight wars with big long-run benefits.” In practice, however, it’s very difficult to predict a war’s long-run consequences. One of the great lessons of Tetlock’s *Expert Political Judgment* is that foreign policy experts are *much* more certain of their predictions than they have any right to be.²
3. *For a war to be morally justified, its long-run benefits have to be substantially larger than its short-run costs.* I call this “the principle of mild deontology.” Almost everyone thinks it’s wrong to murder a random person and use his organs to save the lives of five other people. For a war to be morally justified, then, its (innocent lives saved/innocent lives lost) ratio would have to exceed 5:1. (I personally think that a much higher ratio is morally required, but I don’t need that assumption to make my case).

Are there conceivable circumstances under which I’d break my pacifist principles? Yes; as I explained in my debate with Robin Hanson, I oppose “one-sentence moral theories”:

It is absurd to latch on to an abstract grand moral theory, and then defend it against every counter-example.

In the real world, however, pacifism is a sound guide to action. While I admit that wars occasionally have good overall consequences, it's very difficult to identify these wars in advance. And unless you're willing to bite the bullet of involuntary organ donation, "good overall consequences" are insufficient to morally justify war. If the advocates of a war can't reasonably claim that they're saving five times as many innocent lives as they take, they're in the wrong.

I suspect that economists' main objection to pacifism is it actually *increases* the quantity of war by reducing the cost of aggression. As I've argued before, though, this is at best a half-truth:

Threats and bullying don't just move along the "demand for crossing you" curve. If your targets perceive your behavior as inappropriate, mean, or downright evil, it shifts their "demand for crossing you" out. Call it psychology, or just common sense: People who previously bore you no ill will now start looking for a chance to give you a taste of your own medicine.

The upshot for foreign policy is that people who warn about "sowing the seeds of hate" are not the simpletons they often seem to be.

Military reprisals against, for example, nations that harbor terrorists reduce the quantity of terrorism holding anti-U.S. hatred fixed. But if people in target countries and those who sympathize with them feel the reprisals are unjustified, we are making them angrier and thereby increasing the demand for terrorism. Net effect: Ambiguous.³

Rebecca West once wrote, “Feminism is the radical notion that women are people.” Pacifism, similarly, is the radical notion that before you kill innocent people, you should be reasonably sure that your action will have very good consequences. That’s a one-sentence moral theory even I’m comfortable embracing.

April 5, 2010

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Why Libertarians Should Be Pacifists, Not Isolationists.” *EconLog*, March 22, 2010.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “My Defense of Experts Against the Leading Expert.” *EconLog*, December 11, 2007.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “Why Most Economists Are Hawks and Why They Might Be Wrong.” *EconLog*, April 27, 2005.

Cliches of Anti-Pacifism

I'm a pacifist.¹ I realize that it's an unpopular position, but I'm still surprised by how quick people are to dismiss the position with cliches. Here are three of the most common.

1. "If you want peace, prepare for war." This claim is obviously overstated. Is North Korea really pursuing the smart path to peace by keeping almost 5% of its population on active military duty? How about Hitler's rearmament? Was the Soviet Union preparing for peace by spending 15-20% of its GDP on the Red Army?

No on all three counts. The truth is that preparation for war often *causes* war by frightening and provoking other countries. That's why the collapse of the Red Army made the inhabitants of the former Soviet Union safer from nuclear attack than they'd been since 1945. This doesn't mean that disarmament always makes countries safer. But it does mean that military preparation frequently has the perverse effect of making countries less safe.² Discovering the conditions under which this occurs takes a lot more than a one-liner.

2. "Those who beat their swords into plowshares, will plow for those who don't." In earlier centuries, this was usually true. But almost all rulers treated their subjects like chattel in those days. The main reason to fear war

wasn't that policies would change if "your" government were defeated, but that you'd suffer or perish before the conflict was resolved. From the point of view of the ruled, pacifism would usually have been an improvement.

In the modern world, the plowshares cliche is even more misguided. If we look at the list of military spending by country, the U.S. naturally leads the pack, but is any sensible person worried that the U.S. will invade their country in order to take their stuff? While the U.S. has the power to literally enslave most of the world, most Americans think it would be wrong, so it's not going to happen. The same clearly holds for five of the other top-ten military powers: the UK (#3), France (#4), Germany (#6), Japan (#7), and Italy (#9). Even China, at #2, has far less awful intentions than the plowshares cliche suggests: While it might invade a totally disarmed Taiwan, the next step would be One Country, Two Systems – not mass enslavement of the Taiwanese.

3. "Pacifism didn't work with Hitler." True enough. But then again, *nothing* worked with Hitler. The man was a monster. Poland tried resistance and was virtually destroyed. Stalin tried alliance and was stabbed in the back. The Allies tried unconditional surrender and left most of Europe in ruins, and half under Stalinism. Sure, with 20/20 hindsight, Britain and France could have invaded Germany in 1933 – or interrupted his parents a few minutes before his conception in 1888. But two can play at the hindsight game: Pacifism could easily have prevented World War I, leaving no room for the likes of Hitler to rise to power.

November 23, 2010

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Common-Sense Case for Pacifism.” *EconLog*, April 5, 2010.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Why Most Economists Are Hawks and Why They Might Be Wrong.” *EconLog*, April 27, 2005.

The Seen, the Unseen, War, and Peace

Economists and libertarians often argue that foolish policies prevail because the benefits of government action are more visible than the costs. To bolster their point, many reference Bastiat's classic essay, "What Is Seen and What is Not Seen."¹ Here's how Bastiat puts it:

In the economic sphere an act, a habit, an institution, a law produces not only one effect, but a series of effects. Of these effects, the first alone is immediate; it appears simultaneously with its cause; it is seen. The other effects emerge only subsequently; they are not seen; we are fortunate if we foresee them.

[...]

Yet this difference is tremendous; for it almost always happens that when the immediate consequence is favorable, the later consequences are disastrous, and vice versa. Whence it follows that the bad economist pursues a small present good that will be followed by a great evil to come, while the good economist pursues a great good to come, at the risk of a small present evil.

I've loved this essay and line of argument for years. But lately, I've noticed an elephantine counter-example: war. The immediate, visible consequences of war are horrifying. I wouldn't even bother with a supporting quotation if

Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* weren't so eloquent:

On the next floor below are the abdominal and spine cases, head wounds and double amputations. On the right side of the wing are the jaw wounds, gas cases, nose, ear, and neck wounds. On the left the blind and the lung wounds, pelvis wounds, wounds in the joints, wounds in the testicles, wounds in the intestines. Here a man realizes for the first time how many places a man can get hit.

[...]

A man cannot realize that above such shattered bodies there are still human faces in which life goes its daily round. And this is only one hospital, one single station; there are hundreds of thousands in Germany, hundreds of thousands in France, hundreds of thousands in Russia. How senseless is everything that can ever be written, done, or thought, when such things are possible. It must all be lies and of no account when the culture of a thousand years could not prevent this stream of blood being poured out, these torture-chambers in their hundreds of thousands. A hospital alone shows what war is.

If people judged war purely on the basis of its obvious, immediate consequences, then, pacifism would be almost universal. To sell war, you've got to convince people that its non-obvious, distant consequences are positively fantastic. Contra Bastiat, though, it's ridiculously easy to convince them of this. If you tell people that the skies will fall if their

country doesn't fight, they believe it – even though the worst-case scenario is usually the loss of some territory most people can't even find on a map.

My best explanation is that Bastiat's seen/unseen fallacy is *not* a general psychological tendency. Instead, it's an expression of anti-market bias: Since people dislike markets, they're quick to dismiss claims about their hidden benefits.² When people are favorably predisposed to an institution, however, they're quite open to the possibility that it's better than it looks to the naked eye. The government's a good example, but so are religion, medicine, and education.

When it comes to the unseen benefits of war, there's actually a perfect storm of irrationality. Not only do people like the government, the institution responsible for running the war. Support for war also neatly coheres with the public's anti-foreign bias.³ If someone announces that killing a bunch of weirdos in another country will save the motherland and cure bad breath, we're inclined to believe him – even if ghastly scenes from Erich Maria Remarque are right in front of our faces.

June 21, 2010

Notes

1. Bastiat, Frederic. "That Which is Seen, and That Which is Not Seen." July 1850.

2. Caplan, Bryan. “The 4 Boneheaded Biases of Stupid Voters.” *Reason*, October, 2007.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “Framing Anti-Foreign Bias.” *EconLog*, March 21, 2006.

What's the Use of Crying Over Spilled Blood?

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, you may recall, was dubbed Operation Iraqi Freedom. Eleven years and over 100,000 civilian deaths later, the name is a dark comedy. The replacement Shiite-dominated government is a close ally of the Iranian theocracy and is now immersed in a new civil war against a would-be Sunni caliphate, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

When the original supporters of Operation Iraqi Freedom urge further military action, it's rhetorically easy to mock them for their past failures. But is it reasonable? Sure, mistakes were made. But shouldn't arguments about additional military action rest exclusively on the world we actually face right now? In economic terms, harping about past failures sounds like the sunk cost fallacy writ large. What's the use of crying over spilled blood?

Here's the use: *Past failures predict future failures*. Most Americans thought Operation Iraq Freedom was a good idea at the time. American hawks were especially hopeful. Both groups' predictions turned out to be deeply mistaken. For starters, their failures remind us that human beings are bad at predicting wars' long-run consequences. More importantly, though, hawks' greater failures remind us that contemporary hawks are *especially* bad at predicting wars' long-run consequences.

You could say, “We should focus on experts’ arguments, not their track record.” But this is the height of naivete. No one has time to thoughtfully evaluate experts’ arguments on more than a handful of issues. And even if you did have years of free time on your hands, the truism remains: past failures predict future failures. Discounting experts with bad track records is as reasonable as deleting spam emails unread.

If we held every proponent of every war to these unforgiving standards, we’d fight very few wars. Some wars work out well, but singling out such wars in advance is extraordinarily difficult. Hawks may take this as a *reductio ad absurdum* of my position, but they’re the ones being absurd.¹ If you can’t calmly say, “We can be extremely confident that killing lots of innocents in the short run will vastly improve the world in the long run,” you shouldn’t kill lots of innocents. And killing lots of innocents is what every modern war entails.

August 21, 2014

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Common-Sense Case for Pacifism.” *EconLog*, April 5, 2010.

Game of Thrones and the Common-Sense Case for Pacifism

[Warning: Full of book and show spoilers.]

“And those who have not swords can still die upon them.” The words are J.R.R. Tolkien’s, but they could just as easily have come from the pen of George R.R. Martin, author of the wildly popular *Game of Thrones* series. Martin’s fantasy world is hard and cruel, full of men (and more than a few women) deaf to reason and compassion. It’s hardly a fertile testing ground for idealistic doctrines. Yet after finishing the most recent volume, I’m ready to defend a controversial thesis: *Game of Thrones* forcefully illustrates my common-sense case for pacifism.

My case for pacifism, to recap, comes down to three simple premises. The first two are empirical:

Premise #1: The short-run costs of war are clearly awful. [Empirical claim about immediate effects of war].

Premise #2: The long-run benefits of war are highly uncertain. [Empirical claim about people’s ability to accurately forecast the long-run effects of war].

These empirical claims imply pacifism when combined with a bland moral premise:

Premise #3: For a war to be morally justified, the expected long-run benefits have to substantially exceed its short-run costs. [Moral claim, inspired by Judith Jarvis Thomson's forced organ donation hypothetical].¹

I've repeatedly argued that both empirical premises are true in the real world.² My task here is to show that they're true in a fantasy world that's practically designed to put pacifism to the sword. If the case for pacifism makes sense in Westeros, it makes even better sense in the modern civilized world.

I doubt many *GoT* fans will dispute Premise #1. In Martin's world, soldiers don't just murder and mutilate each other. They are lions and wolves to any civilian population they encounter. As Tyrion bluntly tells his men at the Battle of the Blackwater:

This is your city Stannis means to sack. That's your gate he's ramming. If he gets in, it will be your houses he burns, your gold he steals, your women he will rape.

Virtually every active army in the books practices wanton pillage and mass rape. (Stannis, ironically, is relatively scrupulous; he eventually gets rape under control by summarily punishing the crime with gelding). When an army passes through a civilian area, they routinely take the people's food and burn their crops. Starvation swiftly follows. War also turns out to be a prime breeding ground for horrible diseases like the bloody flux.

What about Premise #2? Even Martin's best and brightest severely miscalculate the long-run effects of war.

Consider the short career of Robb Stark. After Joffrey arrests his father for treason, Robb raises an army, proclaims himself King in the North, and moves south. He wins several victories, but his father gets executed anyway. Robb sends his best friend Theon Greyjoy to win allies in the Iron Islands. But Theon betrays Robb, joining a massive sneak attack behind Robb's lines. Much of the North falls to House Greyjoy, and Theon captures – and ultimately burns – Winterfell, the Northern capital. Before long, Robb is the much-mocked “King Who Lost the North.” When he tries to rebuild damaged alliances, Robb's ally Walder Frey assassinates him at the Red Wedding, scattering his once-proud army to the winds.

There can be no doubt that Robb would have stayed home if he knew what was going to happen. But his defeat hardly translates into triumph for his enemies. Stannis loses most of his army in the Battle of the Blackwater and eventually retreats to the North with a tiny remnant of his forces. The Lannisters briefly reign supreme. But the assassinations of King Joffrey and Tywin Lannister leave the paranoid Cersei in charge. She quickly alienates her allies, empowers an upstart army of religious fanatics, and ends up running naked through the streets of King's Landing. Not what she had in mind.

To be fair, *GoT* does feature a much more promising war: Daenerys Targaryen's anachronistic crusade to abolish slavery in the east. My co-author Ilya Somin is almost ready to enlist:

Before I read the Red Wedding scene, I was – like most readers – inclined to sympathize with Robb and hoping that he prevails. His

shocking demise led me to reflect on Robb's shortcomings and the underlying message of the series much more seriously than I otherwise would have. Superficially, Robb seems more admirable than the Lannisters; he has a sense of honor, and is not personally sadistic like King Joffrey. But his ultimate objective is actually very similar to theirs: to serve the interests of his House. He does not go to war to give the people of Westeros a better government, but to avenge his father's death and protect his family's position of power. It seems unlikely that Stark rule would be much better for the average Westerosi than Lannister rule. By removing Robb and emphasizing the narrowness of his political vision, Martin highlights the futility of his war for the vast majority of the people. Eliminating Robb also focuses more of our attention on Daenerys Targaryen.

With her determination to abolish slavery and promote freedom, she is the one contender for the crown who actually does have an agenda that might benefit more than a tiny clique of elites.³

If you look past Daenerys' good intentions, though, she also falls terribly short of satisfying Premise #3. She begins by freeing the slaves of Astapor. After putting power in the hands of freed slaves, she moves on to Yunkai. She terrifies them into freeing their slaves as well. Then she moves on to Meereen, conquers it, frees its slaves, and settles down.

Before long, though, her crusade comes apart at the seams. The freed slaves of Astapor quickly create a new slave class. War breaks out between Astapor and Yunkai, leading to Astapor's swift defeat. After the horrible plague dies down, the Yunkai clearly plan to reimpose slavery and the status quo ante. Quentyn Martell's eyewitness reaction:

The Red City was the closest thing to hell he ever hoped to know. The Yunkai'i had sealed the broken gates to keep the dead and dying inside the city, but the sights that he had seen riding down those red brick streets would haunt Quentyn Martell forever. A river choked with corpses. The priestess in her torn robes, impaled upon a stake and attended by a cloud of glistening green flies. Dying men staggering through the streets, bloody and befouled. Children fighting over half-cooked puppies. The last free king of Astapor, screaming naked in the pit as he was set on by a score of starving dogs. And fires, fires everywhere.

Meanwhile, Daenerys contends with reactionary terrorism in Meereen. Pro-slavery forces from Yunkai and Qarth besiege her city. The disease spreads like wildfire. And Book 5 abruptly ends. What will happen in Book 6? I don't know, but I'm willing to bet it won't be pretty.

Looming in the background of all this conflict are two other factors almost every combatant fails or refuses to see.

First, winter is coming – and in Westeros, seasons last years. The war doesn't just disrupt the food supply; it preempts the population's last chance to gather food for the lean years ahead. Mass famine is inevitable because every squabbling would-be king refused to back down.

Second, a mighty undead army is mustering north of the Wall. The consequences of their invasion are unusually predictable: They hate all life and kill everything in their path. War against these literal monsters probably doesn't run afoul of Premise #2. Unfortunately, the preceding human-versus-human wars in Westeros leave mankind with little ability to resist the looming undead invasion. (Well, it's fantasy, so maybe Daenerys will

save the day with her dragons. Maybe). People's ability to forecast the long-run effects of war is so bad that they run out of resources long before the one war with clear long-run benefits crashes down upon them.

Of course, I can't fully dissect five kilo-pages of material in a single blog post. True fans can no doubt point to counter-examples of wars that fulfill their promise. My point, though, is not that wars in *GoT* always end badly. My point, rather, is that their long-run benefits are extremely uncertain. Wars in *GoT* often produce *negative* long-run benefits – and no one in the story is wise enough to *foresee* which wars will end badly.

Under these circumstances, pacifism is common sense. If you're going to unleash murder, rape, famine, and disease on the world, you'd better have a very good reason. And you can't have a very good reason if you can't accurately forecast wars' long-run effects. Swallowing your pride and sheathing your sword may not seem very heroic. But this is precisely what a real hero in the world of George R.R. Martin would do. Instead of glorifying the war-mongering of Robb Stark or Daenerys Targaryen, we should honor the common decency of Samwell Tarly.

September 18, 2013

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “What Is the Forced Organ Donation Hypothetical?” *EconLog*, September 12, 2013.
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3. Somin, Ilya. “Reflections on the Red Wedding.” *Reason*, June 3, 2013.

Martial Negligence in Game of Thrones and Beyond

I've previously argued that George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* is implicitly a great pacifist work.¹ While rewatching season 2 with my younger son, I re-discovered a scene worthy of a pacifist ovation. While Talisa, the crucial pacifist character, appears only in the show, the following exchange sheds great light on the role of martial negligence in Martin's fictional universe. For context, Robb Stark is the King in the North, Talisa is a battlefield medic, and they're surrounded by the bodies of maimed and dead soldiers.

Talisa: That boy lost his foot on your orders.

Robb: They killed my father.

Talisa: That boy did?

Robb: The family he fights for.

Talisa: Do you think he's friends with King Joffrey? He's a fisherman's son that grew up near Lannisport. He probably never held a spear before they shoved one in his hands a few months ago.

Robb: I have no hatred for the lad.

Talisa: That should help his foot grow back.

Robb: You'd have us surrender, end all this bloodshed. I understand. The country would be at peace and life would be just under the righteous hand of good King Joffrey.

Talisa: You're going to kill Joffrey?

Robb: If the gods give me strength.

Talisa: And then what?

Robb: I don't know. We'll go back to Winterfell. I have no desire to sit on the Iron Throne.

Talisa: So who will?

Robb: I don't know.

Talisa: You're fighting to overthrow a king, and yet you have no plan for what comes after?

Robb: First we have to win the war.

Notice: Rather than argue that war can never be justified, Talisa shows that Robb is unleashing the horrors of war *casually*. He has no master plan to bring great good from a great evil. Instead, he has a master plan to do great evil, motivated by *vague wishes* to do great good. Proverbially, however, if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.

Is this scene an unfair caricature of the practice of moralized warfare? Hardly. U.S. leaders of both parties barely thought about what would happen after the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq or Muammar Qaddafi in Libya.² Roosevelt's view of Stalin was mind-bogglingly naive. Wilson, a former Princeton professor, wrote his sophomoric 14 Points, then dumped most of them in a failed effort to build a sophomoric "League of Nations." This is what a morally serious case for just war sounds like, but don't expect to hear anything like it for as long as you live.³

Why do even well-intentioned leaders so carefully plan for war, and so negligently plan for peace? Simple: Despite their self-righteousness, they're drunk with power. Well-intentioned? Don't make me laugh. Yes, with great power comes great responsibility... which politicians routinely fail to exercise in reality and Westeros alike.

June 18, 2019

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. "Game of Thrones and the Common-Sense Case for Pacifism." *EconLog*, September 18, 2013.
2. O'Hanlon, Michael. "Iraq Without a Plan." *Brookings*, January 1, 2005; Caplan, Bryan. "Wishful Thinking and Unintended Consequences." *EconLog*, March 1, 2016.
3. Caplan, Bryan. "Steelmanning the Iraq War." *EconLog*, March 20, 2018.

Codifying Our Worst Impulses: The Ideas that Started World War II

World War II was the deadliest violent conflict in human history. Death tolls vary but often reach 80 million souls. What caused it? Lists of proximate causes never end, but the only credible “root cause” is simply: *ideas*. Three countries started World War II: Japan, Germany, and the Soviet Union. While popular summaries rarely list the Soviets as initiators because Hitler double-crossed Stalin two years later, Molotov and Ribbentrop’s so-called Treaty of Non-Aggression Between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was a Treaty of Aggression Against Poland, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Romania. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.

What ideas led the leaders of Japan, Germany, and the Soviet Union to war? The obvious answer is extreme nationalism – the view *any* action is morally praiseworthy if it advances the interests of your nation-state. Heinrich Himmler said it best:

For the SS Man, one principle must apply absolutely: we must be honest, decent, loyal, and comradely to members of our own blood, and to no one else. What happens to the Russians, the Czechs, is totally indifferent to me... Whether other races live well or die of

hunger is only of interest to me insofar as we need them as slaves for our culture; otherwise that doesn't interest me. Whether 10,000 Russian women fall down from exhaustion in building a tank ditch is of interest to me only insofar as the tank ditches are finished for Germany.

...When somebody comes to me and says, I can't build tank ditches with children or women. That's inhumane, they'll die doing it. Then I must say: You are a murderer of your own blood, since, if the tank ditches are not built, then German soldiers will die, and they are the sons of German mothers. That is our blood. That is how I would like to indoctrinate this SS, and, I believe, have indoctrinated, as one of the holiest laws of the future: our concern, our duty, is to our Folk, and to our blood. That is what we must care for and think about, work for and fight for, and nothing else. Everything else can be indifferent to us.¹

Almost everyone understands that Japan and Germany grew extremely nationalistic during the 1930s.² Few realize that the same holds for the Soviet Union as well. Under Stalinism, *anything* that advanced the interests of the Soviet Union was *the* moral imperative – starting with the reabsorption of all the breakaway territories of the Russian Empire.³

By itself, however, extreme nationalism need not generate war. Rationally speaking, the best way to advance the national interest is with peace and consumerism. The leadership of Japan, Germany, and the Soviet Union, however, all angrily rejected this bourgeois, “shopkeepers” perspective. Instead, they equated the national interest with the power and glory of the government – and angrily denounced Western “plutocracies.”

This was most obvious in the USSR, which deliberately eradicated the rich, business, and private property itself in order to build a totalitarian militarized society. But Germany's National Socialists had a similar vision. Their goal was not to build an idyllic consumer society, but a mighty war machine. Unlike the Soviets, however, the Nazis had the common sense to *harness* the rich, business, and private property rather than destroy them. As Hitler told Nazi defector Hermann Rauschning:

He had no intention, like Russia, of "liquidating" the possessing class. On the contrary, he would compel it to contribute by its abilities towards the building up of the new order. He could not afford to allow Germany to vegetate for years, as Russia had done, in famine and misery. Besides, the present owners of property would be grateful that their lives had been spared. They would be dependent and in a condition of permanent fear of worse things to come.⁴

The same holds for Japan: Its leaders equated the national interest with the power and glory of the Japanese government, not the safety and prosperity of the Japanese people.⁵ So while the Japanese government happily used the domestic rich and domestic business, it truly bled them dry during the war. As Walter Scheidel explains in *The Great Leveler*:

Japan was once one of the most unequal countries on earth. In 1938, the country's "1 percent" received 19.9 percent of all reported income before taxes and transfers. Within the next seven years, their share dropped by two-thirds, all the way down to 6.4 percent. More than half of this loss was incurred by the richest tenth of that top

bracket: their income share collapsed from 9.2 percent to 1.9 percent in the same period, a decline by almost four-fifths.

However rapid and massive these shifts in the distribution of income, they pale in comparison to the even more dramatic destruction of the elite's wealth. The declared real value of the largest 1 percent of estates in Japan fell by 90 percent between 1936 and 1945 and by almost 97 percent between 1936 and 1949. The top 0.1 percent of all estates lost even more—93 percent and more than 98 percent, respectively. In real terms, the amount of wealth required to count a household among the richest 0.01 percent (or one in 10,000) in 1949 would have put it in only the top 5 percent back in 1936. Fortunes had shrunk so much that what used to count as mere affluence was now out of reach for all but a very few.

What's the right word for "equating the national interest with the power and glory of the government rather than peace and consumerism"? There are many candidate labels – "statism," "romanticism," "populism," "communitarianism," "anti-capitalism." But none is quite right, so we might as well stick with the label that activists who equated the national interest with the power and glory of the government have preferred throughout the 20th century: *socialism*. Obviously, there are many kinds of self-identified socialists – including socialists who unequivocally seek a peaceful, consumerist society. Historically, however, these are rare – and since I'm not a socialist, I say that "real socialism" equals "what most self-styled socialists do when they have power." Whatever label you prefer, the key point is that all the regimes that started World War II praised the power

and glory of the government to the skies – and brought traditional elites – the rich and business – to their knees. Or their graves.

Before you join me in blaming World War II on nationalism and socialism, though, there's an obvious objection: *These ideas have been ubiquitous for ages.* My response: The emotional impulses behind nationalism and socialism – impulses like xenophobia and anti-market bias – are indeed long-lived and widespread.⁶ Far more children dream of being warriors than merchants. But the initiators of World War II turned these knee-jerk feelings into bodies of thought. They *codified* humanity's worst impulses into explicit, militant, self-conscious ideologies. And they took their ideologies seriously enough to kill for them – and often to die for them.

Does this mean that every latter-day nationalist and socialist is morally comparable to the architects of World War II? No; that's absurd. The reason for this moral non-comparability, though, is disturbing. The *rhetoric* of modern nationalism and socialism remains grotesque. Anyone who says “*By any means necessary*” is, by implication, saying, “If it takes 80 million deaths for us to win, then so be it.” The saving grace of latter-day nationalists and socialists is that almost all of them are hypocrites. They may say, “*By any means necessary*,” but thankfully few have the stomach for it. As I've said before, if your ideas are bad, hypocrisy makes them less bad.⁷

Still, I am dismayed by the renewed popularity of nationalism and socialism. I don't think World War III is coming this century. If it does come, however, I will blame the nationalists and socialists who take their scary slogans to heart.

September 1, 2019

Notes

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3. Caplan, Bryan. “Soviet Poland, 1939-41.” *EconLog*, October 28, 2010.
4. Rauschning, Hermann. *The Voice of Destruction*. Pelican Publishing, 1940.
5. Caplan, Bryan. “When Ayn Rand Villains Ruled the Earth.” *EconLog*, October 22, 2006.
6. Caplan, Bryan. “From the Quaint to the Bizarre: Jeff Friedman on Hayek.” *EconLog*, October 22, 2006.
7. Caplan, Bryan. “Incorruptibly Evil.” *EconLog*, September 25, 2012.

You Don't Know the Best Way to Deal with Russia

Foreign policy experts love making bold predictions. The clearer their conclusions, the wiser they sound. Unfortunately, as Philip Tetlock documents, their predictions about controversial topics are scarcely better than chance.¹ They're all style, no substance. *The Economist*'s March 2014's editorial on Russia and NATO beautifully illustrates these pathologies.

The overconfident recommendation:

[T]he West should forcefully reassert NATO's willingness to defend itself and make it clear that all members of the alliance share its complete protection...

In particular, that means other NATO members sending at least a few troops, missiles and aircraft to the Baltics (or to neighbouring Poland), and making clear that bigger forces will follow if there is any continued aggression from Mr Putin.

The cursory recognition of countervailing considerations:

Why go that far? Plenty of people in the West would prefer to "wait and see". The Balts have the promise of protection, they point out,

so there is only danger in provoking Mr Putin. Wishful thinkers say that having made his point in Crimea, he will probably stop while he is still ahead.

Instead of ratcheting up tension, the West should provide “off-ramps” that steer Russia towards détente. Other hard-nosed foreign-policy “realists” argue that Russia has legitimate interests in its near-abroad. It is madness, they say, to pick a fight when Russia and the West have other business to be getting on with—Syria’s civil war, Iran’s nuclear programme and China’s growing power.

A litany of overconfident predictions:

In fact the opposite is true. The greatest provocation to Mr Putin is to fail to stand up to him, and the least costly time to resist him is now. Emboldened, Mr Putin could test NATO’s resolve by changing the facts on the ground (grabbing a slice of Russian-speaking Latvia, say, or creating a corridor through Lithuania to Kaliningrad) and daring the alliance to risk nuclear war. More likely he would try destabilisation—the sabotage of Baltic railways; the killing of Russians by agents provocateurs; strikes, protests and anonymous economy-wide cyber-attacks. That would make life intolerable for the Balts, without necessarily eliciting a response from the West.

Either way, if the Balts begin to disintegrate, it would leave the West with a much less palatable choice than it has today: NATO would have to walk away from its main premise, that aggression against one is aggression on all, or it would have to respond—and to

restore deterrence, NATO's response would have to be commensurately greater.

That in turn would pose the immediate threat of escalation.

Better to take steps today, so that Mr Putin understands he has nothing to gain from stirring up trouble.

Notice: *The Economist* presents no empirics about past experiences with “standing up” versus “backing down.” If it bothered to do so, it would find many supportive examples – plus many unsupportive counterexamples. World War II is the poster child for “standing up.” World War I is the poster child for “backing down.” The Korean War – standing up. The Vietnam War – backing down. Anyone who knows basic history can multiply such examples endlessly. International relations is inherently complicated. In hindsight, it’s easy to explain how Serbian terrorism in 1914 led to the North Korean Communist dictatorship in 2014. But who in 1913 even hinted at this possibility?

This doesn’t mean, of course, that empirical study of foreign policy is fruitless. Maybe an exhaustive study would reveal that standing up works better 55% of the time, and backing down works better 45% of the time.² But unless you hide behind lame tautologies (“I favor *smart* standing up. That never fails!”), you’re unlikely to reach a stronger conclusion.

You could object, “You can’t galvanize resistance by saying there’s a 55% chance you’re right.” Fair enough. But if that’s all you can honestly claim, why are you so eager to galvanize resistance in the first place? Why are you so hasty to claim opposing experts haven’t a clue? Maybe you should spend a few years publicly betting your opponents.³ There’s no

better way to prove to the world – and yourself – that your forecasts are genuinely better than chance.

Look in the mirror. You don't know the best way to deal with Russia. "Taking steps today" could work precisely as *The Economist* hopes. It could lead Putin to double down. Crossing your fingers and waiting for things to blow over might be a disaster. Then again, it might work. Stranger things have happened. If you scoff, I'm happy to bet. But since you're claiming knowledge and I'm pleading ignorance, I want odds.⁴

P.S. Not April Fools.

April 1, 2014

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. "Tackling Tetlock." *EconLog*, December 26, 2005.
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Tell Me the Difference Between My Lai and Hiroshima

In the My Lai Massacre, a company of American ground troops killed between 347 and 504 unarmed Vietnamese civilians in a village suspected of harboring Communist guerrillas (the VC). After the massacre became public knowledge, Captain Ernest Medina denied giving orders to kill women and children. But some platoon leaders testified (without plea bargains, as far as I can tell) that Medina had explicitly ordered them to kill every living thing in the village.

In Hiroshima, the American crew of the Enola Gay killed 90,000 to 166,000 people in a mid-size Japanese city with an atomic bomb. According to the best estimate I could find, about 12,000 of the dead were Japanese soldiers.¹ The rest were unarmed civilians. No one disputes that Enola Gay's crew was following orders.

The My Lai Massacre is now almost universally considered a heinous war crime. The Hiroshima bombing, in contrast, enjoys bipartisan admiration. What moral distinctions might you draw between the two?

1. You could say that Hiroshima contained enemy soldiers, and My Lai didn't. But as far as I can tell, no one disputes that My Lai harbored

the VC. And even if some villagers did harbor the VC, we would still regard the mass killing of unarmed civilians a war crime.

2. You could say that Hiroshima's civilians shared collective guilt for Japan's crimes, but the My Lai civilians didn't share collective guilt for the VC's crimes. But if villagers did indeed harbor the VC, why would their collective guilt be any less than that of the Japanese?
3. You could say that the ratio of soldiers to civilians killed was much higher in Hiroshima than My Lai. Maybe; it's hard to say. But the Hiroshima ratio was only 7-13%. Would the presence of $347*7\% = 24$ VCs among My Lai's dead mean that American actions were not a war crime?
4. You could say that the Americans *couldn't* separately target soldiers in Hiroshima, but they could separately target soldiers in My Lai. But that's false. Americans had a wide variety of weapons and tactics to use against the Japanese; many would have targeted soldiers but spared civilians. Furthermore, as American soldiers in Vietnam often complained, when you're fighting guerrillas it's extremely difficult to tell soldiers and civilians apart. Even a kid can fire a gun or plant a mine. The perpetrators of the My Lai Massacre could truthfully insist that killing a lot of civilians was the only way to make sure they killed their enemy soldiers.
5. You could say that the Japanese started the war, and the VC didn't. But in what sense did the VC not start the Vietnam War? It's not like the South Vietnamese government suddenly sneak attacked a peaceful guerrilla army wandering the countryside.
6. You could say that the American soldiers in Hiroshima were just following orders, while the American soldiers in My Lai weren't. But

the evidence strongly suggests that the soldiers in My Lai *were* following orders. More importantly, if the soldiers in My Lai were following orders, we would consider their commander a war criminal. By that logic, the commander of the Enola Gay would be a war criminal, too.

7. You could say that Hiroshima successfully ended the war and saved lives, and My Lai plainly failed to do so. But My Lai was much smaller than Hiroshima. If My Lai tactics were applied on a vast scale – say 300 villages to make the body count comparable to Hiroshima’s – maybe they too could have ended the war and saved lives.* In any case, by this logic, Hiroshima would have been a massive war crime *if* it failed to make the Japanese surrender.
8. I propose that the real reason for the distinction is simply this: The soldiers in My Lai murdered people they could see face-to-face. The crew of the Enola Gay dropped a bomb from a high distance and flew away.

Needless to say, if the true explanation is (8), either Hiroshima was a war crime, or My Lai wasn’t. Well, I suppose you could say that long-distance murder isn’t really murder.

Any crucial moral distinctions between My Lai and Hiroshima I’ve missed? If so, please tell me.

* After South Vietnam fell, Communists killed millions in Indochina. Most were in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, but if North Vietnam had been defeated, Cambodia probably would have remained non-Communist.

HT: Question inspired by Michael Huemer, my favorite living philosopher.² Actually, after reading the draft of his latest book, *Freedom*

and Authority, Huemer is my favorite philosopher of all time.

January 19, 2012

Notes

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2. Caplan, Bryan. “Michael Humer Profile.” *EconLog*, April 7, 2011.

The Demented Pacifism of Irving Fisher

On July 15, 1915, the *New York Times* ran an interview with legendary economist Irving Fisher. His response to the Great War was staunchly pacifist:

After this war is over, of course, Europe will find herself prostrated economically, by the destruction of property and workers, and not only that – the survivors will lack the strength and vital power which the aggregate had before the war. So far as the strongest still survive, they will be crippled largely in body, mind, and estate. Europe will be a vast hospital full of invalids, a vast almshouse full of paupers, a vast cemetery full of graves.

This will leave the United States the one great nation, physically and otherwise fit to carry onward the torch of civilization. We, alone, of the world's great peoples, will remain endowed with both the economic and vital power necessary for the prosecution of that mission. Therefore, it seems to me that it must be clear to every thinking man that Europe should serve to us as a warning and not as an example.

The tragedy there should stir us on to reduce, not to increase our militaristic ideas. While Europe is spending life we should set ourselves determinedly at the task of saving life.

Music to my ears. But if you read the whole interview, you'll learn that Fisher's *argument* for pacifism is nothing short of demented. According to Fisher, war isn't bad because it's mass murder; it's bad because it's *dysgenic* mass murder!

It is the quality rather than the quantity of human life that should be held precious...

If war would weed out only the criminal, the vicious, the feeble-minded, the insane, the habitual paupers, and others of the defective classes, it might lay claim, with some show of justice, to the beneficent virtues sometimes ascribed to it.

But the truth is that its effects are diametrically opposite. It eliminates the young men, who should be the fathers of the next generation – men medically selected as the largest, strongest, most alert, and best endowed in every way...

Their less endowed fellows, medically rejected from military service, because of defects in stature, eyesight, hearing, and mentality, are left at home to reproduce the race.

The *NYT* never challenges Fisher; indeed, the format strongly suggests that Fisher is both great and wise. A handful of questions the *NYT* neglected to ask:

1. Shouldn't we hold *both* the quality and the quantity of human life precious? If equal fractions of every “quality level” suddenly died, wouldn't that be bad?
2. Your list of low-quality people is both long and diverse – everyone from criminals to short people. Should we hope for the sudden death of

every one of these groups? Just some of the groups? Where's your breakeven point – i.e., the lowest-quality people better living than dead?

3. In the interview, you mention that we should “segregate, and even, perhaps, sterilize those among us who are unfit to become parents.” Why stop there? It seems like you should favor mass murder, too. If we hold *only* quality, not quantity, precious, isn’t mass murder a moral duty?
4. Are you really being fair to the Great War? Countries could rearrange their recruitment and deployment strategies to make the whole process eugenic. For example, they could exempt the best specimens from military service – or give them desk jobs.
5. Comparative advantage question for you: A doctor is the world’s best surgeon and the world’s fastest typist. Would he be better off if he hired a secretary – or murdered one?

We've learned so much from human genetic research. But when I read Fisher, I understand why the subject terrifies so many people. Hereditarianism combined with inane, half-baked moral philosophy does indeed logically imply Nazi-style homicidal mania. But don't blame the facts of human genetics. Blame the inane, half-baked moral philosophy.

January 11, 2012

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Where Eugenics Goes Wrong: The Implications of Comparative Advantage.” *EconLog*, January 21, 2006.

Why Most Economists are Hawks and Why They Might Be Wrong

I've never seen a survey, but casual empiricism makes me think that economists are hawks. Arnold Kling calls himself a Jacksonian – “the patriotic fighters for whom the worst sin is not going to war, it's losing one.” But even liberal Democratic economists strike me as pretty eager to settle international disputes by bombing enemies back into the Stone Age.

The use of force is easy to rationalize in terms of basic economics. “We should make them PAY for what they've done!” It's just the law of demand: raise the price of crossing us, and fewer people will cross us. Make the price another Hiroshima, and perhaps the quantity demanded will fall to zero.

There is something to this line of argument, but it is too simple by far. Consider the following example. Suppose you go up to everyone you work with and tell them: “If you even *think* about getting in my way, you will be in a world of pain!” (Or as Marv puts it in *Sin City*: “And when his eyes go dead, the hell I send him to will seem like heaven after what I've done to him.”)¹ You're raising the price of getting in your way, right? So the predicted effect of this threat should be to make people treat you better.

That's a *crazy* prediction. Making dire threats might scare some enemies off, but its primary effect would be to create new enemies. People who

didn't care for you before will now be out to getcha.

So why doesn't the law of demand work in this situation? Threats and bullying don't just *move along* the "demand for crossing you" curve. If your targets perceive your behavior as inappropriate, mean, or downright evil, it *shifts* their "demand for crossing you" out. Call it psychology, or just common sense: People who previously bore you no ill will now start looking for a chance to give you a taste of your own medicine.

The upshot for foreign policy is that people who warn about "sowing the seeds of hate" are not the simpletons they often seem to be. Military reprisals against, for example, nations that harbor terrorists reduce the quantity of terrorism holding anti-U.S. hatred fixed. But if people in target countries and those who sympathize with them feel the reprisals are unjustified, we are making them angrier and thereby increasing the demand for terrorism. Net effect: Ambiguous.

Not convinced? One story I heard soon after 9/11 is that Osama bin Laden was hoping that the American public would "Vote Yes for Lake Afghanistan." (A popular t-shirt when I was a kid was "Vote Yes for Lake Iran.") Anger at the decision to kill millions of Afghans in revenge for 3000 American deaths would galvanize the Muslim world (at minimum) and make recruiting more terrorists easy as pie. Was that bin Laden's plan? I don't know, but it could easily have worked.

Still not convinced? Try this thought experiment. Suppose the Israelis started executing the families of suicide bombers – men, women, and children. How sure are you that the quantity of suicide bombing would fall? It is more than plausible that this heinous policy would enrage the Muslim world, sparking more terrorism rather than less.

Economics is a great tool for solving social problems. After one semester of economics, for example, any decent student knows the solution to rush hour congestion: Raise the price of using the road! Unfortunately, achieving lasting peace is a lot harder than speeding up traffic.

April 27, 2005

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “*Sin City* and the Bizarre World of Entertainers’ Unions.” *EconLog*, March 11, 2005.

Steelmanning the Iraq War

The Iraq War started on March 20, 2003. I always opposed it, for my standard pacifist reasons. But here is a case *for* the Iraq War that would have intellectually and morally impressed me at the time. To be clear: Though I'm the author, I strongly *disagree* with this speech. Still, I'd enjoy talking to someone who sincerely believed it.

You can treat what follows as a steelmanning exercise. (It's not really an Ideological Turing Test because as far as I know, no prominent advocate of the Iraq War would agree with it).¹ Alternately, you can treat it as a mirror: Actual war-makers are blameworthy insofar as they fall short of the standards it exemplifies.

My fellow Americans,

In World War II, over 400,000 American soldiers lost their lives over the course of four years. It was a tremendous and tragic loss. But it was absolutely worth it. The sacrifice of the fallen is the foundation of the amazingly peaceful and prosperous world in which we live. Yes, we take their achievement for granted. But the achievement was so great that it would have been worth paying a far steeper price.

Now our nation and the civilized world face another grave challenge. We saw it plainly in the terrorist attacks of September 11,

2001. But those attacks are only a symptom of a festering threat to the peace and prosperity of the world. What is that threat? Though I fear alienating possible allies, the best name for that threat is Muslim tyranny. Whether Sunni, Shiites, or “secular,” the Muslim world is almost entirely ruled by governments that have little respect for democracy and even less for human rights. After years of study – and careful analysis of DARPA-sponsored prediction markets – I conclude with a heavy heart that Muslim tyranny will not fix itself. Indeed, its theory and practice are spreading and intensifying, threatening Central Asia, Africa, and even Europe.

For now, I freely admit, Muslim tyranny poses little military threat to the civilized world. But the same was once true for Communism and fascism. These threats could and should have been removed in their infancy, sparing mankind countless horrors. While we cannot undo the mistakes of the past, we can avoid repeating them. As your leader, I say we must.

Make no mistake about it: Our mission will be painful and long. If you are not prepared to lose a million American lives to achieve lasting victory, we should not go to war. If you are not prepared for a hundred-year occupation, we should not go to war. If you are not prepared for a thousand domestic retaliatory terrorist attacks, we should not go to war. If you are not prepared for the war to spread far beyond the borders of Iraq, we should not go to war.

I do not seek enthusiastic but short-lived support; indeed, fickle support is more dangerous than thoughtful opposition. Instead, I ask each of you to visualize the immense and lasting suffering our country and the world are going to endure if we follow my lead.

Indeed, I ask you to visualize the vast numbers of innocent lives our war will destroy. Think of all the children the United States and its allies burned to cinders in World War II. To win, we will have to do the same. Nothing can justify such atrocities – except a high probability of making Muslim tyranny history.

Why start with Iraq? By the standards of the region, Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime is “secular.” But it is a ghastly tyranny, and its Islamic roots insulate it from the life-giving ideas of human rights and democracy. Furthermore, it is extremely diplomatically isolated. Militarily, we can defeat them with ease – and turn Iraq into a model for the rest of the Muslim world.

It would be criminal to invade Iraq without meticulously describing our model in advance.² So let me share it. While our goal is to bring human rights and democracy to Iraq, human rights will come first. Democracy will only come when human rights in Iraq are democratically sustainable. This distinction is crucial because Muslim tyranny has deep cultural roots. Saddam Hussein is not personally popular in Iraq, but he's a lot more popular than the ideals of liberty.

What does all this mean in practice? Let me be blunt. We will give Iraq full democracy once gay couples can walk the streets of Baghdad holding hands. We will give Iraq full democracy once ex-Muslims can sleep soundly in Mosul after publicly preaching atheism on Iraqi television. We will give Iraq full democracy once violence between Sunni and Shia in Iraq is as common as violence between Catholics and Protestants in the U.S. And not before.

As in post-war Germany and Japan, we will hold elections. But only candidates who embrace our model will be allowed to run – and any elected official who refuses full cooperation with the American military occupation will be summarily removed. Our enemies will no doubt call this “imperialism.” I say this is bigotry on their part; if American rule is the only credible way to protect human rights in Iraq, people of all nations should support American rule.

Many advised me not to use the phrase “Muslim tyranny.” But I honestly couldn’t think of a better one. All of the major religions have, at one point, provided an ideological foundation for tyranny. But Islam is the only major religion that continues to serve this function. We’re going to end that once and for all. Freedom of religion is a basic human right – but imposing your religion on others is not.

I’m sure many of you are thinking, “He’s asking a lot.” You’re right. To repeat, Iraq is only the beginning. In the best-case scenario, the many surrounding Muslim tyrannies will see that we mean business, and earnestly launch domestic reforms. I welcome such developments with open arms, but we should not count on anything of the sort. Instead, we should expect Muslim tyranny to get worse before it gets better. Fortunately, to repeat, they are militarily no match for us. Our only scarce resource is resolved. As long as we are willing to lose a million American lives over the next century, we will do for the Muslim world what we did for Germany and Japan: bring human rights to their people and security to the world.

I know that our enemies will selectively quote this speech to make me seem like a monster. And I know that my predecessors gave little heed to the innocent foreign lives they took in pursuit of victory. Shame on them! So let me say this: If I could end Muslim tyranny without killing a single person, I would gladly do it. Any leader who wishes to spare his people the horrors of war can do so by immediately unconditionally surrendering to us. If that prospect frightens you, look how we treated the people of Germany and Japan when World War II ended. For us, there is no victory until we turn our most wretched enemies into flourishing friends. I fondly look forward to the day when Disneyland is packed with Iraqi tourists.

In the darkest days of World War II, Winston Churchill told the British people, “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.” I admire these sentiments, but I know that our enemy is not yet at the gate. There is a far worse course than doing nothing: Invading Iraq in anger, then abandoning it in frustration. But our best option is to excise Muslim tyranny now when it’s weak, instead of waiting for this political cancer to spread. My fellow Americans, are you with me?

March 20, 2018

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Ideological Turing Test.” *EconLog*, June 20, 2011.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Wars of Negligence.” *EconLog*, December 2, 2015.

IV

How Good is Freedom?

Because Freedom

lately I've heard libertarians ridiculed because their argument against some law boils down to, "Because freedom." Why shouldn't we have inheritance taxes? Because freedom. Why shouldn't we ban handguns? Because freedom. Why shouldn't we have an affirmative consent standard for rape? Because freedom.

The ridicule is often unfair on its own terms. There *are* consequentialist arguments for these libertarian positions if you care to listen. Still, critics correctly sense that even self-styled consequentialist libertarians have a strong pro-freedom, anti-government *presumption*. If the consequences of government action are anywhere in the vicinity of "bad overall," libertarians frequently do say, "Because freedom" to get over the hump.

What few critics care to admit, though, is that they too routinely make the same intellectual move. Almost everyone does. Whenever an honest assessment of consequences of government action fails to yield ideologically palatable answers, non-libertarians retreat to "Because freedom" too.

Why not ban Satanism? Because freedom.

Why shouldn't societies where homophobes vastly outnumber gays legally persecute gays? Because freedom.

Why not punish strangers who have unprotected sex without being tested for STDs? Because freedom.

Why not forbid climbing Mount Everest? Because freedom.

Why not require adults to get a Non-Alcoholic's License to buy alcohol? Because freedom.

Why let the Nazis march in Skokie? Because freedom.

Why let parents prevent grandparents from visiting their grandchildren? Because freedom.

Sure, you *can* offer consequentialist justifications of these policies. But if you're convinced *all* of these consequentialist cases are clear-cut against government intervention, you're guilty of wishful thinking. Honestly, can you point to *anyone* who knows enough to do a passable cost-benefit analysis of all of these issues? Doubtful. The argument that gets you to your conviction is "Because freedom."

Not that there's anything wrong with that. "Because freedom" isn't the only morally relevant political argument. But truth be told, it's one of the best.¹

May 5, 2015

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. "Wars of Negligence." *EconLog*, December 2, 2015.

The Speech of Heroes

Almost everyone loves the idea of “speaking truth to power.” Standing tall, talking boldly, consequences be damned – how heroic!

Yet on reflection, this Speech of Heroes takes two radically different forms.

The most common Speech of Heroes, by far, *upholds* Social Desirability Bias. Example: “Everyone should be completely equal” sounds wonderful, but no actual society follows through. Many self-styled heroic orators respond along these lines:

Equality! We all say we believe in it. We know it’s the right path. Yet we are a den of hypocrites! We pay lip service to the ideal of equality, but when inequality glares at us from every corner, we avert our eyes. Shame on us! Shame! I say unto you, we must practice what we preach. Let us live the equality we love. Put apathy aside, my brothers and sisters. Let us tear down all the inequalities we see. Then let us ferret out every lingering pocket of inequality. We must tear power from the grasp of all the corrupt leaders who casually say they oppose inequality but never do anything about it. Together we can, should, will, and must build a totally equal society!

This kind of heroic rhetoric is standard in religious societies. The sacred texts provide a strict blueprint for life, yet the government makes only a token effort to strictly implement the blueprint. In response, the heroic orator sticks out his neck, decries the hypocrisy of the Powers That Be, and demands strict adherence to the holy book. Which is music to the ears of every pious member of this society. See the Protestant Reformation or radical Islamism for nice examples.

Notice, however, that this heroic rhetoric also dominates socialist and nationalist oratory. Step 1: Loudly and clearly affirm a crowd-pleasing ideal. Step 2: Decry the obvious hypocrisy of the status quo. Step 3: Promise to strictly implement the crowd-pleasing ideal. You've got socialist slogans like, "Social ownership of the means of production," "Complete equality," or "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." You've got nationalist slogans like, "Death before dishonor," "Germany for the Germans," or "The safety and prosperity of *all* our people." In each case, the speaker presents himself as a hero by puritanically appealing to popular sentiment.

Once in a long while, however, we encounter a radically different form of heroic oratory. Instead of upholding Social Desirability Bias, the hero *frontally attacks* it. As in:

Equality! You all pay lip service to it, but who really believes it?

Why should people who produce and contribute the most receive the same treatment as people who do little or nothing? You love to denounce the hypocrites who say they believe in equality but fail to deliver it. But I say to you: Those hypocrites keep you alive! In a totally equal society, there's no incentive to do anything but kvetch.

If you're tired of hypocrisy, remember that there are two ways to end it. You could strictly implement this monstrous ideal of equality. Or you could proclaim the truth: Equality is a monstrous ideal! Let's raise the banner of meritocracy, and thank our greatest producers instead of scapegoating them.

In a religious society, the analogue would naturally be rationalistic atheism: "Forget these pathetic 'holy' books, fantasies written long ago by ignorant fanatics." In a nationalist society, the analogue would be along the lines of, "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel," or even, "Our country is not the best in the world. It's not even average. It's below average – and things won't improve until we admit our failures and humbly emulate the winners."

Which form of oratory is more heroic? Once you take Social Desirability Bias seriously, the answer is clear. You can't "speak truth to power" *unless you speak the truth*. Implausible scenarios where Social Desirability Bias and the truth coincidentally converge notwithstanding, appealing to Social Desirability Bias is deeply unheroic. Even villainous.

And truth aside, challenging your society's fundamental values takes a lot more courage than merely decrying the violation of those values.

Yes, when you damn ruling elites for hypocrisy, those elites often retaliate. Rhetorically, however, you're still taking the path of low resistance. You start with simple-minded feel-good slogans with broad appeal. Then you point out corruption flagrant enough for anyone to see.

When you denounce your society's *fundamental* values, however, you outrage elites *and* masses alike. When you merely attack hypocrisy, elites have to worry about making a martyr out of you. When you spurn Social

Desirability Bias, in contrast, elites win popular support by teaching you the price of arrogance. Who but a hero would openly challenge such a powerful pair of enemies?

Do I hold myself out as a man who embodies the Speech of Heroes? Barely. While I routinely challenge Social Desirability Bias, my society remains highly tolerant. No one's going to jail me for my words. Indeed, since I have tenure, no one will even fire me for my words. If I lived in a normal repressive society, I would publicly say far less than I do. A gold-star hero would publicly express thoughts like mine... while living in Communist China or Saudi Arabia.

While I wouldn't advise you to try this, anyone who does so is my hero.

January 9, 2020

The Mirage of Libertarian Populism

There are times and places where most people want more individual freedom than they have. The majority of the citizens of the Soviet Union did not want the state to seize farmers' land, or send Orthodox priests to Siberia. The majority of the citizens of 18th-century France and Spain did not want to pay high taxes to build their kings more palaces and fund more foreign wars. And I bet that the majority of the citizens of modern China want the freedom to have any many kids as they want. In the right times and places, a libertarian can say "give the people what they want" with a good conscience. In the right times and places, a libertarian can be a populist.

In modern democracies, however, libertarian populism is not a viable option. Why? Because there is very strong evidence that the majority favors either as much or more government than exists. All of the main categories of government spending – Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, military – are popular. The only item the public consistently favors cutting is foreign aid – about 1% of the budget. Furthermore, the public heavily supports even the least defensible infringements on personal liberty – like the prohibition of marijuana.

OK, libertarians: Suppose you could press a button that overruled one of the multitudes of statist policies that a majority supports. Would you push?

If you won't push the button, you're not much of a libertarian. The libertarian who refuses to overrule popular statism is saying, "Individual freedom will have to wait until the majority thinks it's a good idea." That's more tedious than waiting for Godot.

If you are willing to push the button, however, people will call you an "elitist" for second-guessing the majority. And they'll be right. The libertarian who overrules popular statism is saying "At least on this issue, I know better than most people."

With my book *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, several people have questioned whether my elitism is consistent with libertarianism. They've got it all wrong. In a modern democracy, not only *can* a libertarian be elitist; a libertarian *has to be* elitist. To be a libertarian in a modern democracy is to say that nearly 300 million Americans are wrong, and a handful of nay-sayers are right. So how can you be one of the nay-sayers, unless you think you and your fellow nay-sayers have exceptionally good judgment?

None of this means, of course, that libertarians ought to be rude or unfriendly. If we want to change the world in a libertarian direction, we have to convince people who don't already agree with us. And rhetorically speaking, "I'm right, you're wrong" falls flat. (I prefer "I'm right, the people outside this classroom are wrong, and you don't want to be like *them*, do you?") But in a modern democracy, libertarians cannot honestly praise the wisdom of the common man. He's the guy who got us where we are today.

November 12, 2006

What Took You So Long?

At the semester's first Philosophy, Politics, and Economics Workshop at George Mason University, Tyler Cowen talked about the political economy of the Mexican village of Oapan.¹ According to Tyler, being the political leader of this village is a burden, not a blessing. As is often the case in rural Latin America, there is strong social pressure on the most economically successful villagers to take a turn at the helm. During his term, the leader is expected to basically burn up his personal fortune to pay for public services. If he persistently refuses, he loses a lot of respect... and maybe more. (Insert thinly veiled threats here).

This setup is known as the cargo system. As one website explains:

In the context of the religious system that the descendants of the Mayan Indians practice the word “cargo” refers to a burden. These burdens are offices held by individuals within a community that consist of civil-religious duties that are to be carried out by the office holder. Office holders are required to use their own money to cover the expenses involved in carrying out these various duties, and often use all their savings in order to complete their terms.

If you want to avoid this burden in Oapan, Tyler explains that there are several common escape routes:

1. Avoid success. Those who have no money to spare aren't pressured to lead.
2. Be a drunk.
3. Convert away from Catholicism.

Now think about how bad these incentives are. Any villager who wants to get ahead knows that if he does, he will have to either give away most of what he earns, or become a pariah, an apostate, or a drunk. Despite the low level of formal taxation, the effective marginal tax rate in Oapan is probably above Swedish levels. Tyler offered me a rough guess of 80%! With incentives that bad, it doesn't surprise me that rural Latin America remains impoverished – though the localized art boom has turned Oapan into the exception that proves the rule.

Tyler's account immediately reminded me of one of my favorite books, Helmut Schoeck's *Envy*. If Schoeck's wide-ranging observations are correct, virtually the *whole primitive world* has something akin to the cargo system. If one member of a primitive tribe starts to be more economically successful than others, relatives, friends, and everyone else usually starts demanding hand-outs. As in the cargo system, this basically leaves two choices: either surrender most of your surplus or become a hated pariah. And you know what happens to hated pariahs during a hunt! The upshot is that informal social pressure effectively gives primitive societies very high marginal tax rates – and very bad incentives.

I have a strong suspicion that these incentives of village life are a big part of the explanation for why it took so long for economic growth to take off. For hundreds of thousands of years, human beings were stuck in societies with informal norms that choked off creativity and

entrepreneurship. No wonder the miracle of modernity took so long. For economic growth to really take off, the individual needed a relatively anonymous society where he could turn his back on his neighbors without worrying if an envious neighbor would sink a dagger into it.

September 3, 2005

Notes

1. Cowen, Tyler. *Markets and Cultural Voices*. University of Michigan Press, 2005.

The “Real X” Defense

Consider these two couplets:

Couplet #1: “Socialism has failed.” “No, real socialism has never existed.”

Couplet #2: “Libertarianism has failed.” “No, real libertarianism has never existed.”

In both cases, the point of the first clause is to discredit an economic system.

In both cases, the point of the second clause is to shield an idea.

And in both cases, the shielding comes at a high intellectual cost: You escape blame for real-world failures, but also *lose* credit for real-world successes.

Strategically, then, you’d expect advocates of views with few successes and many failures to adore the “real X” defense. Advocates of views with ample successes and few failures, in contrast, will use it more reluctantly. This expectation holds up: Though both groups have been known to invoke the “real X” defense, socialists are far more likely to deny the relevance of actually-existing socialism than libertarians are to deny the relevance of actually-existing capitalism.

But the fact that an argument is strategically useful (or harmful) for an intellectual movement doesn’t speak to its truth. Maybe socialists are wrong

to evade blame for their system's failures. Maybe libertarians are wrong to claim credit for "their" system's successes. How would you know?

One approach is to drop binary thinking – "real" or "not real" – and classify actually-existing economic systems on a continuum. Set pure socialism – full government ownership of the means of production – equal to 0, and anarcho-capitalism – full private ownership of the means of production – equal to 1. Countries below .2 are at least approximately real socialism; countries above .8 are at least approximately real libertarianism.

Ideally, you could just outsource this to e.g. Fraser's Economic Freedom rankings. But there are two problems. First, extreme socialist regimes like North Korea and Cuba don't even get ranked, presumably due to a lack of trustworthy official data. Second, the rankings are top-coded. Hong Kong gets a high score – 9.03 out of 10, but it's a far cry from minarchism, much less anarcho-capitalism.¹

In any case, believers in the "real X" defense would probably just dispute the methodology. Suppose Fraser gave North Korea a 0.1, and Hong Kong a 6.0. Libertarians would eagerly conclude, "Socialism has been tried; libertarianism hasn't." But who else would concur?

The better approach, in my view, is historical. To ascertain whether "real X" ever existed, you have to find self-conscious believers in X who were, at some point, a powerless fringe movement. Why a fringe movement? Because it demonstrates that they weren't significantly compromising their ideals to gain power. Next, you have to find the subset of such movements that subsequently ruled a country. Then, you have to find the subset of such movements that were so politically dominant during their reign that they had little need to compromise with any other viewpoint. Finally, you have to find the subset of the subset of such movements that

retained extreme political dominance for many years – enough time to actually implement their ideals.

By these historical standards, real socialism has happened *dozens* of times. Look at Lenin's Bolsheviks. Before World War I, they were a powerless band of socialist fanatics. Fellow socialists often loathed them, but for their dogmatism and cruelty, not lack of commitment to socialism.² Then, a perfect storm gave the Bolsheviks absolute power over Russia – power that lasted over 70 years. The origin stories of the other triumphant Marxist-Leninist movements fit the same mold, though the socialists of the Soviet satellite states did have to compromise with the socialists of the Soviet Union proper.

And by these standards, I'm sorry to say, real libertarianism has never happened. Yes, plenty of libertarian groups manage to become self-conscious fringe movements. But none of these movements were ever more than junior partners in a broader political coalition. Reagan and Thatcher gave a few libertarians a place at the table of power, but they were hardly libertarians themselves. You could point to the Founding Fathers of the American Revolution, but they included plenty of mercantilists and slavers. Even post-Communist Georgia doesn't qualify.

The lesson: Socialists own the disasters of actually-existed socialism – and we should never let them forget it. Libertarians, however, do not own the successes of actually-existing capitalism. We were there on the sidelines, desperately trying to nudge the world in a freer direction. But it's pragmatists that pulled the strings that made the modern world possible.

May 17, 2017

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Incredible Vanishing Minarchist.” *EconLog*, June 17, 2015.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “The Mensheviks’ Critique of Bolshevism and the Bolshevik State.” *GMU Economics*.

Making Populism Serious: The Case of Social Security

Almost everyone thinks that Social Security is a great program. Why? Because they've been convinced by the kind of arguments Bastiat would mock.¹ Arguments like:

“Old people can’t work anymore; government should give them money so they won’t be poor.”

“If Social Security didn’t take care of our elders, *we’d* have to do it!”

These arguments are pleasantly convincing, perfect for a presidential debate. All of the following reasonable retorts would cost you votes:

“Couldn’t the elderly have saved for retirement when they were younger?”

“Gee, maybe the government should give *everyone* money so *no one* will be poor!”

“What do you mean ‘We’d have to do it’? You’ve never been legally required to support your parents, but you *are* legally required to pay Social Security taxes.”

“Most old people aren’t poor.”

This doesn’t mean that arguments in favor of Social Security have to be inane. You could definitely craft an intellectually serious defense. And it would look something like the following seven points.

1. Knowing that American elders live in poverty makes Americans feel bad. But private efforts to alleviate their poverty suffer from a big positive externality; when one of us helps the elderly, *everyone* who pities them is a little better off.
2. A reasonable solution is to impose a relatively efficient tax (ideally on a good with negative externalities; in practice on a good like labor with low supply elasticity) to fund transfers to impoverished seniors, thereby alleviating this externality problem.
3. Factoring in seniors' wealth as well as their income, there aren't that many poor seniors, so a modest tax – with modest offsetting costs – could take care of the whole problem.
4. Unfortunately, the public probably wouldn't eagerly support means-tested transfers to the elderly poor. That seems too much like "welfare." The only politically feasible way to solve the problem of senior poverty is to make Social Security universal.
5. To make the program universal requires pretty high taxes. Depending on your definition of "poverty," we'll probably be transferring five to ten *times* as much income as necessary to provide for the destitute seniors we really care about (but strangely hate to single out for special assistance).
6. While these taxes and transfers will be substantial, the disincentive effects will still be tolerable. Furthermore, the benefit formula will be so confusing that people won't realize the severe disconnect between what they pay in and what they take out. See relevant neoclassical and behavioral econ literatures X, Y, and Z.
7. Along the way, we'll also help people with the income – but not the self-control – to save for their own retirement. Two birds with one

stone!

If a presidential candidate made such an argument in a national debate, even I might vote for him, just to reward his suicidal candor. But it's not going to happen. If the issue comes up, *both* sides will defend Social Security with the crowd-pleasing arguments that Bastiat would mock. After all, both sides are playing to win.

August 16, 2012

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “Who Loves Bastiat and Who Loves Him Not.”
EconLog, August 15, 2012.

How to Believe in Free Speech

Almost all libertarians earnestly say, “I believe in free speech.” Normally, though, this goes way beyond the *right* to speak freely. Most libertarians also believe that free speech “works” in some sense – that given a free exchange of ideas, the truth will at least ultimately prevail.

On reflection, this is an awkward position. Western countries don’t have completely free speech, but they are amazingly close to this extreme. Furthermore, the anonymity of the internet makes it easy to evade most of the lingering restrictions on free expression. And yet, as you may have noticed, libertarianism has failed to become popular.

Which raises an awkward question: If free speech yields truth, then shouldn’t we infer that unpopular viewpoints such as libertarianism are simply wrong?

You could heavily lean on the caveat that free speech *ultimately* yields truth. But modern libertarianism has existed for over half a century. Its popularity probably peaked either just before September 11, 2001 – or perhaps just before the 2008 financial crisis. Both of these peaks were modest at best. If that’s what ultimate victory looks like, ultimate victory is a small consolation.

Non-libertarians will naturally be tempted to infer that libertarianism is false. But since *no* political philosophy has achieved decisive intellectual

victory, that's playing with fire. Perhaps staunch moderates could claim victory for every view that 80-90% of people accept, from Social Security to the War on Terror. But staunch moderates are now so rare that it's not even clear if they outnumber libertarians.

At this point, it's tempting to backpedal. When we say "free speech works," why assume that works means "ultimately leads to truth"? People supply and demand ideas for many many reasons. The desire to produce or consume truth is one motive. But people also care about entertainment, tradition, fads, and much more. Books and movies officially labeled "fiction" normally outsell books and movies officially labeled "non-fiction." So it would hardly be surprising if people preferred to heavily adulterate their descriptive beliefs with drama and wishful thinking.

If you backpedal this much, however, can you retain much enthusiasm for free speech? Yes. While free speech doesn't lead to the victory of truth, at least it *allows* the search for truth to continue. As long as you have a large, diverse society, you're likely to have a rationalist subculture – or at least a bunch of subject-specific rationalist subcultures. Free speech allows these truth-seekers to ask thoughtful questions and propose reasonable answers, even if the thoughtful questions are awkward and the reasonable answers are scary. While the rationalists are likely to remain the minority, free speech preserves their existence. And since the methods and fruits of rationalism appeal to the smart and curious, free speech allows rationalists to continuously skim off the cognitive cream of society. Free speech doesn't make truth popular, but it does rescue the elect from abject error.

Though I can't honestly give three cheers to free speech, I can give it two. The first cheer for free speech is deontological: People have a right to express themselves freely, even if their expression is erroneous or irrational.

The second cheer for free speech is elitist: Free speech lets the best and brightest produce and consume truth, even if most people hold the truth in disdain. But we can't honestly give free speech a third cheer for making truth popular – because the claim that free speech makes truth popular simply isn't true.

And thanks to free speech, I'm free to say so!

June 12, 2018

Voltaire Reconsidered

Voltaire never actually said, “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” But Voltaire would probably embrace this line – just like legions of other smart, well-meaning people. Interpreted poetically, it’s a sublime human rights slogan. But interpreted literally, the Voltairean maxim is rather silly. Let’s walk through its flaws step by step.

Suppose for starters that you know for sure that X is true. Unfortunately, X is so unpopular that loudly asserting your right to say X inevitably gets you killed. Question: Should you make a point of loudly asserting your right to say X? Probably not. You can do so much with the gift of life. Why is asserting the right to say X so much more important than everything else you’ll experience and accomplish by remaining alive?

Sure, you can devise hypotheticals where courting death by asserting the right to say X is an admirable choice. Maybe standing up for the right to say X will, via your death, save many innocent lives, or replace an awful tyranny with something much better. Maybe you only have ten minutes left to live and want to go out with a noble bang. Except in such unusual circumstances, however, throwing your life away to speak a few forbidden words seems not only imprudent but wrong. Any true friend would beg you to come to your senses and shut your piehole.

Now consider: If standing up for your *own* right to utter truth X is a grave mistake, why is standing up for someone *else's* right to do the same any better? Indeed, common sense morality says you have only modest obligations to help perfect strangers in dire need.¹ Why then should you assume a blanket obligation to die in defense of strangers' rights to speak when they could easily remain silent?

Notice: So far, I've assumed that dangerous-to-say claim X is definitely true. Question: Should you be more willing to suffer on behalf of the truth or error? Truth, of course. The right to do wrong is important, but how could it possibly outshine the right to do right?²

All this yields the following moral rank ordering: staying alive > asserting your own right to say truths > asserting others' right to say truths > asserting others' right to say falsehoods. Voltaire's maxim seems a gross overstatement. Indeed, it's basically backward.

Of course, you can flatly deny everything I've said. But should you take that route, consider these two awkward facts.

1. The world provides ample opportunities to die defending people's right to make offensive statements. Reposting Charlie Hebdo cartoons on your Facebook page is only getting your feet wet. If you're really ready to die for free speech, travel to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and start handing out copies of the cartoons in person. Martyrdom for civil liberty awaits you.

2. Almost no professed Voltairean takes such actions.

My point is not that Voltaireans are hypocrites, but that they run afoul of the Argument from Conscience.³ The fans of Voltaire are fine people. The fact that Voltaire's most ardent admirers don't throw themselves on their

swords for freedom of speech shows that, deep down, they too realize that their maxim is only eloquent bravado.

P.S. Lest I be misunderstood, I staunchly defend the right to say things I disagree with. But I think it's almost always a bad idea to perish in defense of this right. Call me cowardly if you like.⁴ I'm just being honest.

January 28, 2015

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “The Stranger.” *EconLog*, January 24, 2011.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “An Libertarian Case for Reproductive Laissez-Faire.” *EconLog*, December 30, 2009.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “The Argument from Conscience.” *EconLog*, July 21, 2014.
4. Caplan, Bryan. “Cowardly Positions.” *EconLog*, June 5, 2011.

How to Sell YIMBY to California and New York

Housing is strangely expensive in California and New York. Economists routinely blame their unusually strict regulation of land use and construction. Political observers, in turn, routinely blame unusually strict regulation on NIMBYism – current residents’ “Not In My BackYard” mentality. Strict regulation of construction is so entrenched that only recently has the opposing view even found a name. YIMBY – Yes in My BackYard – is finally a thing.

But how on Earth can YIMBY gain political traction – especially in the big, liberal, high-rent states of California and New York? Publicizing astronomical economic benefits seems unlikely to make converts, especially when leftists can demagogue against deregulation and greedy developers. To animate liberal Californians and New Yorkers, you probably need to somehow connect the high cost of housing to their hated enemies, the Republicans. Given Republicans’ marginal role in Sacramento and Albany, this seems like a tall order.

But wait. Remember how Hillary Clinton won the popular vote but lost the election? The reason, of course, is that she won by huge margins in states like... California (30 points) and New York (22 points). For

Democrats, these margins are probably counter-productive in the short-run, and clearly counter-productive in the long run.

In the short-run: If more of the nation's Republicans lived in CA and NY, Clinton might have won big swing states like Wisconsin, Michigan, or Pennsylvania – without endangering her hold on CA or NY.

In the long run: If more people – of any party! – from solidly Republican states moved to CA and NY, Democrats could count on more electoral votes.

The short-run partisan effect, admittedly, is debatable. Perhaps the Pennsylvanians most likely to move to New York and Michiganders most likely to move to California are disproportionately Democratic. The long-run effect, however, is clear. If CA and NY sharply increased their population, the states would remain solidly Democratic but sharply increase their electoral vote tally. Since electoral votes are zero-sum – five more for CA and NY means five less for the rest of the country – this is even better for Democrats than it sounds.

Going forward, then, here's how I'd sell YIMBY to California and New York.

1. We need more electoral votes to beat the Republicans.
2. The only way to get those votes is to grow our population.
3. The only way to do that is to build a ton of new housing.
4. YIMBY!

What about Republican migrants ruining liberal enclaves? That's when you harp on the Democrats' enormous margins. In fact, given current patterns, CA and NY Democrats should actively *hope* for mass Republican migration. Imagine turning CA into the west-coast version of Florida,

drawing in millions of Republican retirees with cheap housing. Every Republican who moves to CA or NY enhances Democratic power in America.

Couldn't Republican states use exactly the same strategy? Yes, but far less effectively. The states with big Republican margins of victory already have pretty cheap housing and pretty light housing regulation. But sure, there's always room for a little more YIMBY.

Liberal states are vocally resisting Donald Trump, but it's unclear that they're hurting his re-election prospects, much less paving the way for a less Republican future. YIMBY policies could conceivably tip the scales against Trump even in 2020, and would plausibly devastate Republicans in the long run. And since almost all housing regulation is state and local, California and New York can start the great liberal YIMBY conspiracy today.

February 2, 2017

Some Unpleasant Immigration Arithmetic

Let C =total number of immigrants – legal and illegal – who annually enter the U.S. under existing laws.

Let F =the total number of immigrants who would annually enter the U.S. under open borders.

Under perfectly open borders, $C=F$. Under perfectly closed borders, $C=0$. Where does the status quo fall on this continuum? The obvious metric:

Open Borders Index= C/F

With closed borders, the Open Borders Index=0. With open borders, the Open Borders Index=1.

Regardless of your views on immigration, it's hard to see how your estimate of the actually existing Open Borders Index could exceed .05. After all, there are hundreds of millions of people who would love to move to the U.S. just to shine our shoes, and three million would be a very high estimate of annual legal plus illegal immigration. Rhetorical invective notwithstanding, mainstream immigration policy proposals are all in the neighborhood of .01 to .05.

Lessons: If, like me, you want to set the Open Borders Index=1, you should be utterly depressed. Nothing close to open borders is even on the

table. If, however, you want to set the Open Borders Index=0, rejoice. We're approximately there already.

November 19, 2012

Immigration: My Eyes Work Fine

Critics of my open borders advocacy often accuse me of intellectual blindness, of living in a fantasy world of my own creation. So rather than rehash any of my arguments or review the academic evidence yet again, I'm going to celebrate Open Borders Day on March 16th by listing the facts about immigration I see with my own two eyes.

1. I see immigrants – legal and illegal – working hard, without complaining, struggling to make a better life for themselves and their families.
2. I see immigrants – legal and illegal – contributing far more to the world than they could possibly have done at home.
3. I see natives happy to hire and patronize immigrants – and rarely fretting about these immigrants' legal status.
4. I see that people call me out of touch because I live in Fairfax instead of in a poor immigrant neighborhood. But they don't think themselves out of touch because they live in America instead of the Third World.
5. I see that almost all natives break the law on a regular basis. Almost everyone drives over 55 mph on the freeway, for starters. But few natives feel guilty about breaking laws that seem unreasonable, and almost no one wants to crack down on natives who break such laws.

6. The typical illegal immigrant who “went back where he came from” would drastically reduce his family’s standard of living and make the world a poorer place. If following the 55 mph speed limit is unreasonable, so is following U.S. immigration law – to put it mildly. But I see the same natives who break laws every day condemn illegal immigrants as criminals and yearn to crack down on them.
7. If the typical low-skilled immigrant stayed home and tried to improve his political system, he would have a near-zero chance of success.¹ But I see that natives are quick to condemn immigrants for failing to reform their polities.
8. Virtually all of the complaints leveled against immigrants also apply to many natives. I see that native women who enter the workforce make life harder for native men competing for the same jobs. I see that low-income natives who have children cost taxpayers money. I see that young natives vote overwhelmingly Democratic.
9. These standard complaints about immigrants are widely viewed as a good reason to exile immigrants to their often wretched birth countries. When the same complaints are leveled against natives, though, the standard reactions I see are apathy, fatalism, and even denial.
10. The standard complaints about immigrants are widely treated as good reasons to exile virtually all immigrants to their often wretched birth countries – even when the specific complaint plainly doesn’t apply to many immigrants. For example, when people complain about immigrant crime, I never see them say, “Since young males commit virtually all serious crime, this is obviously only an argument against young male immigrants.”

11. Most arguments for immigration restriction are equally good arguments for government regulation of natives' fertility. But I see that almost everyone favors immigration restrictions, and almost no one favors fertility restrictions.
12. I see that almost *everything* immigrants do make their critics angry. The critics are angry when immigrants work, and angry when they're on welfare. The critics are angry if immigrants are visible, and angry if immigrants keep to themselves. The critics are angry if immigrants increase housing prices and angry if immigrants reduce housing prices.
13. I see that human beings have a strong bias against out-groups – but partially restrain these biases to avoid social disapproval.
14. I see that, in our society, this social disapproval is unusually mild when the out-group is current illegal immigrants, and near-zero when the out-group is would-be illegal immigrants.

Put it all together, and what do I see? I see human beings without the good fortune to be born in the First World escaping poverty through honest toil. I see these largely admirable people singled out for public scorn and legal persecution. And I see that the reason for their ill-treatment is not that they're breaking the law, taking jobs, using welfare, or any other choice they make, but because the foreigners in our midst and the foreigners at the gates are the last easy outlets for out-group bias.

March 16, 2014

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “I’m Too Busy Fighting Tyranny to Feed My Family.”
EconLog, January 30, 2014.

How is Immigration Like Nuclear Power?

Nuclear power has the ability to provide cheap, renewable, safe, clean energy for all mankind. But only 10% of global electricity comes from nuclear power.¹

Why is something so great so rare?

Because government strangles nuclear power with regulation.

Why do governments strangle it?

Because nuclear power is unpopular.

Why is it so unpopular?

First, innumeracy. The gains of nuclear power vastly outweigh all the complaints put together, but the complaints are emotionally gripping. Deaths from radiation are horrifying; vastly higher fatalities from coal are not. Even nuclear accidents that kill zero people get worldwide media attention, fueling draconian populist regulation.

Second, spookiness. Scientifically illiterate people can imagine endless far-fetched dangers of nuclear power. And at risk of sounding elitist, almost everyone is scientifically illiterate.

[brief pause]

Immigration has the ability to double the wealth produced by all mankind.²
But only 3% of people on Earth are migrants.³

Why is something so great so rare?

Because government strangles immigration with regulation.

Why do governments strangle it?

Because immigration is unpopular.

Why is it so unpopular?

First, innumeracy. The gains of immigration vastly outweigh all the complaints put together, but the complaints are emotionally gripping. Deaths from immigrant crime are horrifying; vastly higher fatalities from native crime are not. Even immigrant outrages that kill zero people get worldwide media attention, fueling draconian populist regulation.

Second, spookiness. Economically illiterate people can imagine endless far-fetched dangers of immigration. And at risk of sounding elitist, almost everyone is economically illiterate.

November 19, 2018

Notes

1. “Nuclear Power in the World Today.” *Nuclear Energy - World Nuclear Association*.

2. Clemens, Michael. “Economics and Emigration: Trillion-Dollar Bills on the Sidewalk?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 25, pp. 83–106.
3. United Nations. “International Migration Report.” 2017.

Krugman's Cursory Case Against Open Borders

Paul Krugman exemplifies the standard progressive position on immigration. He strongly supports amnesty for existing illegal immigrants, but strongly opposes open borders. His case for amnesty is not novel:

[T]oday's immigrants are the same, in aspiration and behavior, as my grandparents were — people seeking a better life, and by and large finding it.

That's why I enthusiastically support President Obama's new immigration initiative. It's a simple matter of human decency.

Krugman's case against open borders, in contrast, is uniquely his own. How so? Most thinkers who explicitly reject open borders are convinced it would be an absolute disaster. Krugman, in contrast, opposes open borders for the mildest of reasons. Read his sentences carefully:

The New Deal made America a vastly better place, yet it probably wouldn't have been possible without the immigration restrictions that went into effect after World War I. For one thing, absent those restrictions, there would have been many claims, justified or not,

about people flocking to America to take advantage of welfare programs.

Krugman hardly sounds convinced that immigrants *would* have flocked to the U.S. to take advantage of the New Deal. “Justified or not” is awfully agnostic. While Krugman says the New Deal probably wouldn’t have been possible without immigration restrictions, he doesn’t say that immigration restrictions were required to have some version of the welfare state. Nor does he sound convinced that fear of “flocking” would have a *high probability* of *substantially* curtailing the welfare state in some form or other. “Many claims”? Name any major social program that fails to inspire “many claims” about its dangers before, during, and after its adoption.

Krugman continues:

Furthermore, open immigration meant that many of America’s worst-paid workers weren’t citizens and couldn’t vote. Once immigration restrictions were in place, and immigrants already here gained citizenship, this disenfranchised class at the bottom shrank rapidly, helping to create the political conditions for a stronger social safety net. And, yes, low-skill immigration probably has some depressing effect on wages, although the available evidence suggests that the effect is quite small.

Notice: Krugman doesn’t say that exclusion of immigrants was an *essential* political condition for the welfare state to arise. He only says that it *helped* create political conditions for a *stronger* welfare state.

So let’s sum up Krugman’s case against open borders:

1. It's unclear whether immigrants would have flocked to the U.S. to take advantage of the welfare state.
2. But many would hastily assume such an effect, somewhat reducing domestic support for the welfare state.
3. Also, excluding non-voting poor immigrants somewhat altered voter demographics in the welfare state's favor.

Personally, I think that mass immigration does far more good for the truly poor than the welfare state ever has. This isn't just a weird libertarian view; Brad DeLong agrees with a few caveats:

Increased immigration is superior to strengthening the welfare state. I just don't think it will or can happen, so I will advocate the next best thing. From a cosmopolitan world perspective, almost all of the costs of maldistribution come from income gaps between nations and very little come from within-nation inequality. Development is far more important from a world welfare perspective than social insurance within rich countries. And immigration is a powerful tool for world development.

But maybe Brad and I are wrong. Suppose that *if* we faced an either-or choice between the welfare state and open borders, we should choose the welfare state. Krugman still fails to provide any decent argument against open borders. How so? Because marginalism. Krugman claims nothing stronger than, "Open borders would have somewhat reduced the strength of the safety net." Why then is he so convinced that this marginal policy change outweighs the massive harm inflicted by making almost all immigration illegal?¹

This is no hyperbole. Joel Newman shows that the cost of immigration restrictions was already catastrophic by the end of Roosevelt's second term when the U.S. turned away hundreds of thousands of people desperately struggling to escape the clutches of the Nazis. And far more would have applied if they had any hope of getting in – as millions did before World War I.²

Krugman once ridiculed lingering right-wing fear of democratic expropriation:

For the political right has always been uncomfortable with democracy. No matter how well conservatives do in elections, no matter how thoroughly free-market ideology dominates discourse, there is always an undercurrent of fear that the great unwashed will vote in left-wingers who will tax the rich, hand out largess to the poor, and destroy the economy.

Krugman's right. This is a silly fear. Why? Many reasons, but the most obvious is that voters are far from selfish. Most poor voters would consider full-blown expropriation of the rich to be deeply unfair, all incentive effects aside.

What the history of immigration restrictions shows, however, is that decent folk should nevertheless be deeply uncomfortable with democracy. Why? Because most voters are nationalists, and nationalist voters consistently do to foreigners what low-income voters almost never do to the rich: Strip them en masse of their basic rights to work, reside, and travel. Why? For the flimsiest of reasons. Flimsy reasons like: Trapping millions

of foreigners in dire poverty and bloody repression probably makes our safety net somewhat stronger.

To quote GMU econ prodigy Nathaniel Bechhofer: Paul, you're better than this.

December 5, 2014

Notes

1. Clemens, Michael A. “Economics and Emigration: Trillion-Dollar Bills on the Sidewalk?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 25, pp. 83–106.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Immigration, Misanthropy, and the Holocaust.” *EconLog*, August 4, 2013.

The Microaggressions of Immigration

I have zero sympathies for the fashionable crusade against “microaggressions.” When backed by government funding and lawsuits, the concept is a thinly-veiled attack on freedom of speech. But even without government backing, “microaggression” is an attack on common decency. Taking offense when a speaker intends no offense is simply rude. If someone happens to step on our emotional toes, civility impels us to suppress the urge to take it personally. Say “Don’t mention it” – or better yet, don’t mention it.

The microaggression *label* is narrowly tied to leftist identity politics. Support for the *concept*, however, is far broader. With the possible exception of Mormons, what group doesn’t leap at the chance to decry the slightest of slights?¹ On-campus, of course, we usually hear about straight cis-gendered white males committing racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic microaggressions. Off-campus, however, I see a totally different pattern: Natives lamenting the microaggressions immigrants commit against our national identity.

The most obvious case: Americans routinely grouse when immigrants publicly speak languages other than English. They get even more annoyed when they have to “press 1 for English” on an ATM machine or customer service menu. Offending Americans is the furthest thing from the

immigrants' minds; they're just going about their business. But natives take offense anyway: "In America, we speak English!"

The same goes when Americans voice antipathy for immigrants' distinctive appearance: The clothes they wear, the cars they drive, the sports teams they cheer. Immigrants intend no offense, but Americans take offense nonetheless.

I also often hear Americans fret that immigrants – especially Muslims – are too intolerant to keep around. Why? Not because their crime rates are objectively high, but because they come from sexist, homophobic, anti-Semitic cultures – and thereby make women, gays, and Jews feel uncomfortable. The upshot: even the most tolerant Muslim in the world commits microaggressions by walking around, making Americans *wonder* if he's intolerant in his heart.

When leftist college students fume over microaggressions, the non-academic world properly scoffs. Government shouldn't lift a finger, and students should grow thicker skin. Logically, the same goes for immigrants' alleged microaggressions. Government should do nothing, and nativists should grow some tolerance.² Immigration inspires some serious concerns, but natives' hypersensitivity isn't one of them.³

What about Americans' right to "preserve their culture"? I'm tempted to call it the nativist version of a "safe space," but cultural preservation is far more totalitarian. A "safe space" is but an enclave – a small corner of the world where politically-correct norms prevail. To "preserve a culture," in contrast, requires a whole country to impose traditional norms on everyone. And this is crazy: You don't even have the right to force your culture on your adult children, much less millions of strangers.

March 14, 2016

Notes

1. Caplan, Bryan. “They Scare Me.” *EconLog*, October 14, 2015.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “The Meaning of Tolerance.” *EconLog*, December 29, 2014.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “EconLog Reading Club Round-Up: Ancestry and Long-Run Growth.” *EconLog*, February 24, 2016.

Gratis is Not Great

Almost every psychologically normal human is delighted to hear about products everyone can enjoy free of charge. “The schools are free!” “Health care is free!” “Lunch is free!”

According to basic welfare economics, however, gratis goods are almost automatically inefficient. Unless the marginal social cost of the product miraculously happens to be zero, setting a price of zero leads to socially wasteful behavior.

So what makes “free” so beloved? The simplest explanation is that people are reacting selfishly. When someone says, “Oh great, free stuff!” they aren’t assessing the social desirability of the outcome. They’re saying, “Oh goodie, *I* don’t have to pay for this.” But this explanation is quite implausible because people are also pleased to hear about free stuff even when they’re *personally* ineligible to receive it. Think about how often Americans gush, “In Canada, X is free!” Furthermore, even from a totally selfish point of view, free is often a bad deal overall. Making products free ultimately requires higher taxes, and often leads to shortages and lower quality.

A better story is that people are taking transactions costs into account. Free is almost never first-best efficient, but it can easily be second-best efficient.¹ Suppose, for example, that the marginal social cost of adding

another car to the road is \$.75, but the cost of collecting a toll is \$1.00. On balance, it's less inefficient to let people drive for free than impose marginal cost pricing.

On reflection, however, this story is also quite weak. If it were true, people would be pro-gratis for products that are *cheap* to produce. In reality, however, what most excites and delights mankind is gratis products that are *expensive* to produce. Free health care and free education are far more popular than free toothpicks.

The most charitable explanation is that people like making goods free because it's a politically palatable way to redistribute with dignity. If only the poor receive free health care, the story goes, we'll stigmatize the beneficiaries.² They'll receive sub-standard treatment at best. In the long run, even this sub-standard care will be forever vulnerable to repeal. Once we make health care free for everyone, all these problems go away.

But this story, too, is shaky. Empirically, it's far from clear that means-tested programs are markedly less popular or politically stable than universal programs. Whatever their subtle disadvantages, means-tested programs have an obvious advantage: Helping the needy is far cheaper than helping everyone. Finally, if it really were true that we have to help *everyone* to help *anyone*, that would be a potent argument against helping anyone! As I explained a while back:

Economists habitually mock protectionism for its high cost-benefit ratio. “\$265,000 per job saved! How ridiculous.”...

Notice, however, that we can easily ridicule universal social programs in exactly the same way that we ridicule protectionism. Suppose two-thirds of the population is perfectly able to provide for

its own retirement and health insurance. Then the budgetary cost of cloaking welfare for the bottom one-third in universal garb is triple the apparent cost. And that ignores all the disincentive effects of the extra taxes and giveaways. Add it all up, and you could easily get a number in the protectionist ballpark. Think: “\$100,000 per retiree lifted out of poverty! How ridiculous.”³

Even if I’m wrong here, the “Make goods free in order to redistribute with dignity in a politically palatable way” argument is *far* too sophisticated to explain popular affection for gratis goods.⁴ So what *does* explain this affection?

The most credible explanation, as usual, is simple-minded populism. We’re sick of paying for stuff! We don’t want to hear a bunch of bean-counting excuses about the budget! Stop being greedy cheapskates and just give it to us for free! Efficiency means we have to set every price equal to marginal social cost. But our knee-jerk impulses say, “Shut up and fork it over.”

P.S. Does (first-best) efficiency really require us to set every price equal to the marginal social cost? In theory, price discrimination could achieve the same result; we only need the *marginal* consumer to pay the marginal social cost. In practice, however, we’d need telepathy to actually achieve this. After all, if a driver says, “There’s no need to charge me for my pollution because I’m already driving exactly as much as I would with an optimal pollution tax,” can you really take him at his word?

December 3, 2018

Notes

1. Dai, Wei. “The Second best.” *Lesswrong*, July 26, 2009.
2. Caplan, Bryan. “Means-Testing Social Security: The Cohen-Friedman Debate, I.” *EconLog*, January 25, 2015.
3. Caplan, Bryan. “Universal Social Programs vs. Cost-Benefit Analysis.” *EconLog*, September 15, 2011.
4. Caplan, Bryan. “Making Populism Serious: The Case of Social Security.” *EconLog*, August 16, 2012.



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