

A Dissent Against Pseudo-Life

Remarks on the Occasion of the Mid-Year Completion Ceremony
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Several summers ago, I took some time to read the non-fiction writings of the great 19th century Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy. As you may know, he became an eccentric pacifist and radical Christian critic at the end of his life. I was stunned at the force of some of his arguments (though, I confess, I was not entirely persuaded on one of his key points -- that a true Christian must be absolutely celibate!)

What struck me most was Tolstoy's provocative claim that the core of Christianity lies in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount: You see that other fellow committing some terrible sin? Well, Jesus preaches, if you have ever lusted, or allowed jealousy, or envy or hatred to enter your own heart, then you are to be equally condemned! This, Tolstoy claims, is the central teaching of the Christian faith: namely, that we're all in the same fix!

Now, you mid-year completers and your families mustn't worry that I, a Professor of Economics, am about to launch into my own sermon on this august occasion. Still, it seems to me that this religious sentiment is quite relevant to our contemporary, secular lives. My point is that, while the behavioral pathologies and cultural threats that we see in society -- the moral erosions "out there" -- the crime, drug addiction, sexually transmitted disease, idleness, violence and all manner of deviance -- while these are worrisome, nevertheless, our moral crusade against these evils can take on a pathological dimension of its own. We can become self-righteous, legalistic, ungenerous, stiff-necked, and hypocritical. We can fail to see the mote in our own eye. We can neglect to raise questions of social justice. We can blind ourselves to the close relationship that actually exists between, on the one hand, behavioral pathology in the so-called urban underclass of our country and, on the other hand, society-wide factors -- like our greed-driven economy, our media-encouraged worship of the self, our endemic culture of materialism, our vacuous political discourses, our declining civic engagement, and our aversion to sacrificing private gain on behalf of much needed social investments. We can fail to see, in other words, that the problems of the so-called underclass are but an expression, at the bottom of the social hierarchy, of a more profound and widespread moral deviance -- one that involves all of us.

No, I am not a moral relativist. Still, when thinking about the lives of the disadvantaged in our society, the fundamental premise that needs to be established, and is not yet established in American public discourses, is that we are all in this together. *Those* people languishing in the corners of our society are *our* people – they are *us* – whatever may be their race, creed or country of origin, whether they be the crack-addicted, the AIDS-infected, the mentally ill homeless, the juvenile drug sellers, or worse. Whatever the malady, and whatever the offense, we're all in the same fix. We're all in this thing together. **This** is the point that Tolstoy, and Jesus before him, were making. And, this is the point I wish to urge upon your consideration at this moment. It is a point which, if taken seriously, has profound implications for how the privileged among us – that's me and you, folks! – should live our lives.

Just look at what we have wrought. We Americans have established what, to many an outside observer, looks like a system of racial caste in the center of our great cities. I refer here to millions of stigmatized, feared, and invisible people. We hold two million souls under lock and key on any given day, half of whom are black. A third of black children live in poverty. At age 20, black Americans can expect to live 10% less long than whites. One can go on and on with these statistics. And, of course, it is not only blacks who suffer. The extent of disparity in the opportunity to achieve their full human potential, as between the children of the middle class and the children of the disadvantaged – a disparity that one takes for granted in America – is virtually unrivaled elsewhere in the industrial, advanced, civilized, free world. When I travel abroad to lecture on these problems, people are invariably appalled to learn of what happens daily in the United States.

Yet, too many Americans have concluded, in effect, that those languishing at the margins of our society are simply reaping what they have sown. Their suffering is seen as having nothing to do with us – as not being evidence of systemic failures which can be corrected through collective action. Thus, we've given up on the ideal of rehabilitating criminals, and have settled for simply warehousing them. Thus, we accept – despite much rhetoric to the contrary – that it is virtually impossible effectively to educate the children of the poor. Despite the best efforts of people like yourselves, and of progressive institutions like this great university – despite the encouraging signs of moral engagement with these issues that I have seen in my students here at Brown, and that give me hope – despite these things, it remains the case that,

speaking of the country as a whole, there is no broadly-based demand for reform – no sense of moral outrage, no self-criticism and anguished public reflection – in the face of this massive, collective failure.

The core of the problem, in my view, is that the socially marginal are not seen as belonging to the same general public body as the rest of us. At least implicitly, our political community acts as though some are different from the rest and, because of their culture -- because of their bad values, their self-destructive behavior, their malfeasance, their criminality, their lack of responsibility, their unwillingness to engage in hard work – they *deserve* their fate.

Lest you think I exaggerate, here is what the President’s domestic policy advisor – a man named Karl Zinsmeister – wrote in the pages of the American Enterprise Magazine some years ago:

The troubling reality in our ghettos today is that the hellish torments are being inflicted by their own residents. If only some identifiable outside force were creating the siege conditions, nearly any American would gladly swing a battle-axe against such an enemy. But the harder, more tragic reality is that inner-city Americans are being brutalized by their own neighbors, their own reproductive partners, their own teenagers, their own mothers even. And ultimately, by themselves. Who is forcing the crack pipe between those many lips?

What we in the United States have failed to recognize – not merely as individuals, I stress, but as a political community – is that these ghetto enclaves and marginal spaces of our cities are products of our own making: Precisely because we do not want those people near us, we have structured the space in our urban environment (as was revealed by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans last year) so as to keep them away from us. Then, when they fester in their isolation and their marginality, we tut-tut-tut, hypocritically point a finger, saying in effect: “Look at those people. They are a threat to the civilized body. They must be expelled, imprisoned, controlled.” It is not WE who must institute responsible social reforms, but THEY who must embrace personal responsibility. It is not we who must set our social affairs aright, but they who must get their individual acts together.

I am reminded in this context of Bill Cosby's widely reported criticisms of the black poor (“the lower economic types are not living-up to their end of the deal,” Cosby has famously said.) Cosby has been praised for his willingness to speak frankly about such matters. But, courage, forthrightness and the willingness to “call a spade a spade” are no substitutes for a cogent social analysis. Bill Cosby’s well-publicized lament is long on outrage, but falls woefully short when it comes to prescription. Black political and cultural leaders, he insists, should stop making excuses for these “knuckleheads,” and should speak to today’s youth more forthrightly, insisting on the continued relevance of tried and true virtues like self-

restraint, self-discipline, hard work and moral decency.

Saying all of this is fair enough, but it is quite far from being enough said. A serious treatment of this issue would have to look beyond the "culture" of black ghetto dwellers and the public performances of so-called "black leaders," so as to reckon with larger social, political and economic developments that have taken place in American society. Any serious prescription for how to cure what ails ghetto America must look beyond the rhetoric of an aging civil rights leadership class to consider why the social policy making process at all levels of government has failed to respond more helpfully to the increasingly dire condition of our nation's most disadvantaged persons. That is to say, morally and intellectually serious engagement with these problems must deal not just with THEM, but also with US.

So much would seem, upon reflection, to be obvious. I am aware of no instance in human history where behavioral change on the scale that would be needed to reverse the dire straights of America's urban poor has come about through the exhortation of communal leaders. Social pathologies were not unknown in the European immigrant communities of early twentieth century America. Scholars (like the Columbia University historian, Ira Katznelson) seem to agree that they were overcome not by hortatory campaigns of behavioral reform, but rather by massive social policy innovations like the New Deal and the G.I. Bill. If it is obvious that some blacks need to clean up their acts, it is equally obvious that curing what ails America's racial ghettos will require the active involvement, through our public institutions, of all Americans. Where Cosby castigates black leadership for failing to instill proper values in our youth, I am left wondering, as I look back on the debacle that was Hurricane Katrina, where is American leadership on this problem?

Civic inclusion has been the historical imperative in Western political life for 150 years. And yet – despite our self-declared status as a light unto the nations, as a beacon of hope to freedom-loving peoples everywhere – despite these lofty proclamations which were belied by last year's images from the roof tops in flooded New Orleans – the fact is that this historical project of civic inclusion is woefully incomplete in these United States.

The futility of pursuing civic inclusion has been declared by reactionary political forces, like those represented by Karl Zinsmeister, at every step along the way. Yet, in every instance, these forces have been proven wrong. At one time or another, the goal has been derided of including women, landless peasants,

former serfs and slaves, or immigrants more fully in the civic body. Extending to them the franchise, educating their children, providing health and social welfare to them has always been controversial. But, this has been the direction in which the self-declared “civilized” and wealthy nations have been steadily moving since Bismarck, since the revolutions of 1848 and 1870, since the American Civil War with its Reconstruction Amendments, since the Progressive Era and through the New Deal on to the Great Society. This is why we have a progressive federal income tax and an estate tax in this country, why we feed, clothe and house the needy, why we (used to) worry about investing in our cities' infrastructure, and in the human capital of our people. What those images out of New Orleans last year showed is that **THIS AMERICAN PROJECT OF CIVIC INCLUSION REMAINS INCOMPLETE**. And this incompleteness reveals a yawning chasm between an ugly American reality, and America's exalted image of herself.

In closing, I wish to stress that you prospective graduates are not powerless in the face of this situation. Let me remind you of something the great Czech playwright and politician, Vaclav Havel, wrote a quarter-century ago, in his essay "The Power of the Powerless." Writing well before the revolutions of 1989, Havel tries to explain from whence derived the power of the anti-communist dissidents. He begins by asking a seemingly innocuous question: why does the green grocer whom he must pass each morning on his way to his office place a sign in the shop's window that says, "Workers of the World: Unite!" when everyone knows that this is nothing but propaganda? Fear is Havel's answer. The grocer wants simply to get by. So, he complies with the tacit social norm to uphold the prevailing party line. Dissidents derived their power from their willingness to expose, and then openly to challenge, this norm. In the end, Havel's essay boils down to a celebration of the glorious fact that there is something in every human heart that cries out for truth: So long as people are determined to live authentically, the human spirit cannot be extirpated.

Quoting Havel:

"The essential aims of life are present naturally in every person. In everyone there is some longing for humanity's rightful dignity, for moral integrity, for free expression of being, and for a sense of transcendence over the world of existences. Yet, at the same time, each person is capable, to a greater or lesser degree, of coming to terms with living within the lie. Each person somehow succumbs to a profane trivialization of his or her inherent humanity and to utilitarianism. In everyone there is some willingness to merge with the anonymous crowd and to flow comfortably along with it down the river of pseudo-life. This is much more than a simple conflict between two identities. It is something far worse. It is a challenge to the very notion of identity itself."

This, then, is the challenge I want to issue here, now. Not that you should agree with any political position that I may hold, but that you and I, and all of us in this society, might become more fully human,

more fully willing to risk speaking truths about ourselves, our communities and our nation, as we come to understand them. I challenge you to avoid the easy path, to eschew that least-resistance-utilitarianism which amounts, in Havel's memorable phrase, to flowing comfortably with the crowd down the river of pseudo-life.

You have come to the university to learn how to think, to gain an awareness of the central questions with which reflective people have struggled over the centuries, and to develop an appreciation for how elusive the answers to such questions can be. But all of this will be for naught unless you leave these hallowed halls animated by a determination to live within the truth. As a teacher, it is my fervent hope, indeed, my eternal prayer, that you will do so.