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## THEY SAID IT

“Crimes spring from *fixed ideas*. The sacredness of marriage is a fixed idea. From the sacredness it follows that infidelity is a *crime*, and therefore a certain marriage law imposes upon it a shorter or longer *penalty*. But by those who proclaim ‘freedom as sacred’ this penalty must be regarded as a crime against freedom, and only in this sense has public opinion in fact branded the marriage law.

“Society would have *every one* come to his right indeed, but yet only that which is sanctioned by society, to the society-right, not really to *his* right. But I give or take to myself the right out of my own plenitude of power, and against every superior power I am the most impenitent criminal. Owner and creator of my right, I recognize no other source of right than – me, neither God nor the State nor nature nor even man himself with his ‘eternal rights of man,’ neither divine nor human right.” (emphasis in original)

*The Ego and his Own*, Max Stirner, 1844

## BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL . . . AND POLITICS.

Steve and I have been writing about the increasingly eccentric nature of the Democratic Party for almost two years now, beginning with an article dated June 16, 2003 entitled “The Democrats’ Descent Into Madness,” which opened with the sentence, “Slowly but ever so surely the American political left is losing its grip on reality.”

When we wrote that article, we were somewhat alone in the view that the Democrats were not just making a lot of political mistakes but were actually doing and saying things that made no sense either politically or ideologically. Since then, however, a great many well known political commentators on both sides of the aisle have written extensively about the Party’s erratic behavior, which seems not only out of synch with the mainstream of American thought but also with long-held liberal dogma.

In fact, plotting ways to put the Democratic Party back on a rational ideological course has become the popular new parlor game among the Party’s strategists since its devastating loss at the polls last November. New web sites are springing up for this purpose, including one at [www.principlesproject.com](http://www.principlesproject.com), specifically designed, according to the *Washington Post*, to allow “progressives” to participate in an online convention designed to define and promote what Democrats believe.” In addition, a new “think tank” has been established called the Center for American Progress, run by John Podesta and funded in large part by George Soros. Its first two goals are to develop a “long-term vision of a progressive America” and to provide “a forum to generate new progressive ideas and policy proposals.”

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Looking back the other day on some of our many pieces on the subject of this little lost political party, I realized that while we have provided a fairly comprehensive and sometimes entertaining list of symptoms of what appears to be just plain nuttiness among Democrats, we have not always done a good job of examining the forces that are driving this condition.

Occasionally, when in a charitable mood, we have attributed it to the fact that liberalism has been so triumphant in debasing the national culture and imposing big government on all aspects of American life, that it has run out of important things to do, and hence is like the aging Odysseus sitting on the cliffs of Ithaca staring out to sea, desperately wanting to return to battle and to his adventures but realizing that his great victories are in his past and that his future is death. In our less charitable moments, we have attributed Democratic Party madness to the fact that Democrats are so angry at no longer being the nation's majority party that they are unable to act rationally.

I believe that there is a smidgeon of truth to both of these theories. But, upon reflection, it seems unlikely that either could be responsible for so long a period of self-destructive behavior, which has cost the Democrats dearly both in the polls and at the polling booth. Methinks there has to be something more at work here. So this week, I thought I would explore this murky subject in a little more depth.

I'll begin with two examples where there appears to be an odd, irrational disconnect between what Democrats are doing and what would seem to make sense for them to do based on both good politics and traditional liberal ideology.

For starters, the Democratic Party's position on the appointment of John Bolton to be U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations is, by any measure, odd. The idea of an international organization like the United Nations has been a central feature of American liberalism for over 80 years. It was conceived in the feverish mind of Woodrow Wilson, a Democratic Party icon, and was born under the watchful eye of

Harry Truman, another Democratic Party icon. It was swaddled in the grandest of liberal rhetoric from the moment it took its first breath. And it has been praised, supported, and defended by the leading lights of the Democratic Party ever since.

This is the organization that was destined to fulfill one of liberalism's most sacred goals as articulated by Bill Clinton's friend and confidant Strobe Talbott, who once wrote approvingly in *Time Magazine* that in the next century "nationhood as we know it will be obsolete; all states will recognize a single, global authority. A phrase briefly fashionable in the mid-20th century – 'citizen of the world' – will have assumed real meaning by the end of the 21st."

This is also an organization that not only has failed to live up to its grand promise of ensuring world peace, but which has disgraced itself badly in the past several years under the leadership of an inept and corrupt fool. Besides perpetrating the largest financial scam in the history of the world by corrupting an elaborate U.N. scheme to avoid a war between the United States and Iraq, this organization has spread the practice of child molestation and child prostitution among a host of third world nations like some sort of depraved Johnny Appleseed.

And yet, the Democrats are not angry about this. In fact, they don't seem to care one bit. They are not seeking the ouster of the Kofi Annan. They are not even accusing President Bush of contributing to this disgrace by failing to do all he could to prevent it from happening. Instead, they are angry at the President for naming someone as Ambassador to this terribly troubled institution who has pledged to do all he can to clean the place up so that it can go about advancing the liberal cause of world government unimpeded by corruption and decadence.

Would they be happier, one wonders, if President Bush did what I would do were I in his shoes and name someone liberals respect and revere to the job, someone who is more in keeping with the esteem the United Nations so richly deserves? Someone like Jane Fonda, for example? Or Barbra Streisand? Or Michael

Moore? Or possibly Michael Jackson, who would fit right in with the sick bastards in the “blue helmets” that the United Nations happily sends around the world to prey on the women and children they are supposed to be protecting.

By any rational standard, liberals should be absolutely livid at what has gone on at the United Nations in the past several years, and screaming for President Bush to appoint someone who will aggressively attempt to rid that organization of the corruption and fraud that permeates it. Instead they have taken a reactionary stance, defending, for all intents and purposes a status quo that goes against everything they purport to hold dear.

There is something odd about this.

And how about the great debate over Social Security, a program that is not just a centerpiece in American liberalism, but is *the* jewel in the crown of the liberal enterprise. For decades, it has been the shining example of a government program that has worked; one that liberals use to justify all other attempts at collectivist economics. And like the United Nations, it is in trouble. It is arguably not in as much trouble as the United Nations, but it needs a little touching up in light of demographic changes that have occurred in the past 75 years or so, which include a much longer average life expectancy and a dramatically aging population.

So a conservative President of the United States, who might have applauded the fact that this Democratic gem is tarnishing and left it to Democrats to polish it up, announces that he would like to lead the effort to fix the program in advance of a pending catastrophe and would be willing to work closely with the Democrats to accomplish this.

And do they say, “Great, let’s do it. We will work with you to provide a face lift to this great monument to Franklin Roosevelt’s genius?” No they don’t. They act like a gaggle of Tasmanian Devils about to mate. They screech and twist and turn and gnash their teeth and bear their claws. In an astonishing display of reactionary politics, they, in effect, announce that they

would rather see the program steadily rot than even try to assemble a coalition of Democrats and moderate Republicans in an attempt to develop an alternative reform package that would assure that the program plays a central role in the retirement plans of virtually all Americans for another century.

There is something odd about this.

I could go on offering similar examples of seeming Democratic irrationality, but I will instead move on to the promised task of “examining the forces that are driving this condition.”

For starters, let me note that this type of behavior cannot be analyzed or understood in a meaningful way by using the calculus of traditional politics, which emphasizes the success or failure of tactical and strategic actions and policies taken to achieve specific legislative goals. In the case of the Democrats today, this construction fails because their stated goals rarely go beyond simplistic attempts to block some action the White House is taking, and more often than not, the tactics and strategies they employ make little or no sense by conventional political or ideological standards.

The answer to this conundrum is to consider the possibility that the Democratic Party is in the midst of a massive ideological reconstruction project brought on by a profound crisis of spirit, a terrible realization that liberalism has achieved virtually every legislative and regulatory goal it set out to accomplish and accomplished nothing close to what it promised.

Theirs was the party of optimism, opportunity, innovation, equality, open-mindedness. They were the humanitarians. They cared. They were virtuous. And they knew how to make the world a better place. They were against racism, sexism, ageism, and hosts of other “isms” that no one even knew existed, and they knew how to vanquish these evils. They believed in Rousseau’s contention that original sin was a bogus idea, that vice and error are not natural to mankind but are introduced from without, caused mostly by bad institutions. And they knew how to make these institutions good. They knew how to abolish war, fear, want, and the unequal distribution of property.

And they won the political battles. Time after time, they won. Roosevelt's "New Deal" brought with it the Social Security program and a host of other giant government institutions, including, shortly after his death, the United Nations. Johnson's "Great Society" built on this foundation, adding Medicare and Medicaid, and dozens upon dozens of similar programs designed to create a "more just society." Since then the "nanny state" has expanded relentlessly and now imposes itself on virtually every aspect of American life.

And then one day they realized that wars still raged, that man was still wolf to man, that the rich were still rich and acted like rich folks act, and that while "the poor" had more money and more "stuff," they still suffered from the same problems they had suffered from when they had less.

They realized that the daughter of the "liberated woman" turned out to be a little slut, who considered the hard won right to an abortion to be nothing more than a license to please her boy-friend who turned out to be even more disrespectful of women than his father had been. The final straw came when Bill Clinton, the "new man," the man who "cared," the man who understood, the man who cried easily, turned out to be a misogynist who preyed on women and thought it was amusing.

Some liberals reacted by "getting religion" and joining the Republican Party, explaining their prior actions as youthful indiscretion. Others stayed in the Democratic Party and have become increasingly nihilistic, cynical, and angry. Their political actions have become focused on attacking the system that refused to act according to their expectations. They have moved beyond the political and into the realm of the philosophical. They have begun to concentrate on attacking the belief system that stood in the way of the utopia they had set out to create.

They have launched a new political conflict that will, before it is over, determine not just who sits in the White House, or controls Congress, or whether the United Nations and the Social Security programs are

healthy, or how the wealth of the nation is distributed, but will decide whether the belief system upon which the United States was built will continue to be the belief system upon which it is governed.

This belief system can be described as traditional Judeo-Christian. The foundation upon which it stands was established some 3,300 years ago with the receipt of the Decalogue by Moses at Mt. Sinai. Besides Old and New Testament teachings, interpreted and clarified by such scholars as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, who integrated Platonic and Aristotelian concepts respectively, this system embraces a host of traditions, customs, and mores that developed in Western society over many centuries. It is supported by a rich heritage of art and literature, and historic struggles, both religious and secular. The twin concepts of "sin" and "truth" help bind this system together.

The opposing belief system that is currently being adopted by the Democrats as a replacement for liberalism can be described as "post-modernism." It traces its origin to the Enlightenment, when philosophers rejected the traditional system and attempted to establish a moral scheme based on reason alone. As Alasdair MacIntyre notes, this effort succeeded in beginning the process of eroding belief in the theistically based moral order of the Middle Ages. But it failed to establish an alternative moral order that would stand the test of time, despite the efforts of some of history's most distinguished philosophers, including such men as Kierkegaard, Kant and Hume.

Nietzsche was the first philosopher who clearly recognized the failure of the Enlightenment project. But, as MacIntyre points out, instead of arguing for a return to the old views, which he also rejected, he advocated razing to the ground all the structures of inherited moral belief and argument and admitting that all moral judgments are simply masks worn by persons too weak and slavish to assert their "will to power" in aristocratic grandeur, as he thought it should be done. And into the world came a belief system called post-modernism.

Central to the post-modern moral scheme is the concept that there are no ultimate, overarching truths, and that judgments about right and wrong that form the foundation of Judeo-Christian morality are little more than the means by which some people control others, or as Nietzsche put it, the outward expressions of will and power.

Thus, for example, when conservatives maintain that abortion and euthanasia are wrong because they violate the Fifth Commandment, post-modern Democrats maintain that this is nonsense, perpetrated by religious zealots intent on controlling the actions of others by citing a belief system that was dreamed up for that very purpose.

In making this argument, it is important to understand that Democrats are not asserting an opposing set of definitions for what is right and wrong, but are rejecting the very notion that these words can have any absolute meaning. Certainly, they acknowledge that words such as bad, good, right, wrong, etc. are useful. But, for them, these concepts are purely a matter of personal preference, especially where moral issues are concerned. What is “right” or “moral” for me, may not be either “right” or “moral” for you. Or as Bill Clinton’s first Surgeon General, Dr. Jocelyn Elders, put it once when she was asked whether it was wrong for a teen-aged girl to have a child out of wedlock, “No. Everyone has different moral standards.”

Post-modernism is a complex topic. I don’t pretend to understand it well and I certainly am not qualified to explain it in any depth, even if I had the space to do so, which I don’t. But the following paragraphs from a little book entitled *Explaining Post Modernism, Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* by Stephen R.C. Hicks will provide some insight into this belief system, which has infected the Democratic Party, and will, to some degree, help to explain why the Party’s actions seem odd when measured against traditional politics and liberal ideology.

The names of the postmodern vanguard are now familiar: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Richard Rorty. They are its leading strategists. They

set the direction of the movement and provide it with its most potent tools . . . Michel Foucault has identified the major targets: “All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence.” Such necessities must be swept aside as baggage from the past: “It is meaningless to speak in the name of-or against Reason, Truth, or Knowledge” . . .

Many [postmodernists] deconstruct reason, truth, and reality because they believe that in the name of reason, truth, and reality Western civilization has wrought dominance, oppression, and destruction. “Reason and power are one and the same,” Jean-Francois Lyotard states. Both lead to and are synonymous with “prisons, prohibitions, selection process, the public good.”

Postmodernism then becomes an activist strategy against the coalition of reason and power. Postmodernism, Frank Lentricchia explains, “seeks not to find the foundation and the conditions of truth but to exercise power for the purpose of social change.” The task of postmodern professors is to help students” spot, confront, and work against the political horrors of one’s time”

Those horrors, according to postmodernism, are most prominent in the West, Western civilization being where reason and power have been the most developed. But the pain of those horrors is neither inflicted nor suffered equally. Males, whites, and the rich have their hands on the whip of power, and they use it cruelly at the expense of women, racial minorities, and the poor . . .

Thus when someone accuses a Democratic politician of promulgating policies that “make no sense” or are “irrational,” as I did earlier, the response is that such notions of “making sense” and “rationality” imply the existence of an arbitrary set of standards that may or may not be relevant to the current circumstance.

As Democrats have discovered during the past decade or so, a Party that is seeped in this philosophy is not likely to be overwhelmingly successful in winning political power at the ballot box in a society that has a large number of people who still revere traditional definitions of such concepts as truth, right, and wrong and who respect what came to be known during the last presidential election as “moral values.”

But Republicans should not get complacent. For post-modernism is an extremely potent force in America today and has enormous appeal to a large number of citizens who find the restrictions placed upon them by a society that is constructed on the basis of conventional moral and ethical standards to be extremely distasteful. The intensity of the ill feelings in this camp have been evident during the recent battles over same sex marriage and the efforts to prolong the life of Terri Schiavo.

Hence, for Democrats today, the fights that really matter are those that involve defeating the influence of a moral system that attempts to impose what they consider to be archaic and unjust rules of behavior, the rules that Rousseau spoke of when he famously noted that “Everywhere man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains.” Questions concerning the future of the United Nations and the Social Security system pale by comparison.

Doubtless, both Steve and I will write more on this subject in the future. In the meantime, I will close with some paragraphs from an article I wrote in September 1995 entitled “Stirner Vs. Marx Redux,” which addresses the antagonistic relationship between the antecedents of American liberalism and those of post-modernism. It closes with a question that was ignored when I posed it ten years ago. So I close by answering it.

In my opinion, the long-term danger of the existence of this large human residue of post-modernism is that it will grow so large and powerful that it will eventually corrupt the ideological foundation of one or both parties, as each attempts to appeal to the group’s deeply pernicious levels of cynicism.

One might think that liberalism could co-exist comfortably with the post-modernist movement and its political progeny, since most of the leaders of this radical group describe themselves as “liberals.” But the two philosophies are in fact deadly enemies. The vision underlying American liberalism is a joining of forces under the banner of government to right society’s wrongs, to seek to build a Utopian state.

Post-modernism, with its individualism, egoism, political nihilism, and cynicism seeks to build no Utopia; it professes no love for equality, or fraternity. If the Democratic Party joins forces with this new “swing” crowd, it will lose any claim to altruism. To illustrate this point, I would like to offer some brief historical background.

It is generally agreed that the roots of modern day liberalism begin with the ideas of Rousseau, and contain elements of each of the two principal branches that grew out of the French revolution; the more benign, if economically misguided, philosophy of Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier and Robert Owen, and the more malignant “scientific” preachings of Marx and Engels.

The present day roots of post-modernism can be traced to the mid-1960s deconstructionist ideas of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. Students of the movement would probably disagree with me, but for purposes of this analysis I would like to argue that if Marx is the radical antecedent of today’s liberals, then one Max Stirner is Marx’s counterpart for post-modernism.

Stirner was a contemporary of Marx. With Marx, he was one of a group of radical, intensely anti-religious, neo-Hegelians, referred to as the Hippel circle. They met at the Weinstube in the Friedrichstrasse, Berlin,

in the pre-revolutionary 1840s, to rant and argue over what Hegel really meant.

Besides Stirner and Marx, the Hippel circle included such stormy insurgents as Ludwig Feuerbach, whose book *The Essence of Christianity* was said by Engels to have freed him from his religious beliefs; Moses Hess, who was said to have been one of the first men to appreciate Marx's genius and who converted Engels to Communism; and Bruno Bauer, who argued that the New Testament was a fraud, that Jesus never existed.

Stirner's book *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (*The Ego and His Own*), was described for decades after its publication in 1845 as the most dangerous book ever written. It proposed that "the only criterion of life is my Ego" . . .

In his later years, Marx derided virtually all of his old colleagues. But it was the ideas of Stirner that Marx detested and feared most, for Marx knew that if the proletariat ever adopted Stirner's extreme egoism they would never rise up together to overthrow the bourgeoisie. Cynical egoists don't conduct revolutions. They burrow and destroy from within.

Roberto Calasso, in his recent book, *The Ruin of Kasch*, stated it this way.

"In the molten lead that flowed from Stirner's book, in its obsessive repetitions and unseemly arguments, Marx and Engels,

who now claimed to speak for all workers, saw the emergence of a different and fearsome mass of proletarians. Not Pellizza da Volpedo's workers, striding proudly to be gunned down by mustachioed officers, but the infernal, shapeless mass of the Lumpen: incorrigible vagabonds, incapable of class loyalty, rootless from the womb, violent, inarticulate, disrespectful enemies of labor and learning . . . it was the countless other proliferating species that frightened Marx and seemed to him beyond control, like a sea of jellyfish. In Stirner he recognized the herald of that poisoned host. That single individual of Stirner's certainly did not offer an anthropological model for the petty bourgeois (as Marx and Engels, out of polemical shrewdness, claim it did). It represented some thing far more fearsome: the breakdown of the schema of classes, the chaotic irruption that spoiled the sacred drama of history in the penultimate act. This was the prime unforgivable sin--and this is enough to explain the fury of Marx's attacks on Stirner."

The question that begs an answer today then is whether Marx's ideological progeny in America's Democratic party will understand, as he did, the threat from the Stirner gang.

The answer, ten years later is, they didn't.

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