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THEY SAID IT

The contrast between the Platonic and the Socratic creed is even greater than I have shown so far. Plato, I have said, followed Socrates in his definition of the philosopher. ‘Whom do you call true philosophers? Those who love truth’, we read in the Republic. But he himself is not truthful when he makes this statement. He does not really believe in it, for he declares in other places rather bluntly that it is one of the royal privileges, of the sovereign to make full use of lies and deceit: ‘It is the business of the rulers of the city, if it is anybody’s, to tell lies, deceiving both its enemies and its own citizens for the benefit of the city ; and no one else must touch this privilege.’

‘For the benefit of the city’, says Plato. Again we find that the appeal to the principle of collective utility is the ultimate ethical consideration. Totalitarian morality overrules every-thing, even the definition, the Idea, of the philosopher.

Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. I, 1945.

THE TOTALITARIAN IMPULSE.

It is hardly a secret that President Barack Obama – the leader of the United States and thus leader of the Free World – has a bit of a problem with that job description. Leader of the United States is fine, we guess. But the Free World? Not so much. You see, Obama appears to have little appreciation for the America’s role as a global leader.

The U.S. is, from Obama’s perspective, just another country, with no special obligation to the world or to anyone in it. Indeed, during his visit to Europe last spring he specifically declared that he would accept the term “American exceptionalism” but only as long as it is not expected to denote anything exceptional. “I believe in American exceptionalism,” he said, “just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.”

Now, countless commentators have tried to explain the peculiarity of an American president who doesn’t really fancy America. Most have come to the conclusion that Obama’s problem is that he is the victim of educational malpractice, a man steeped in the principles of post-modernism, taught from his youngest days that morality is an artificial construct and the consequence of power, that all cultures are equal and that the first among equals are those that are “oppressed.” As the political commentator Monica Crowley put it last week:

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This kind of multicultural, politically correct, “we’re all unique in unique ways, every kid must win at dodgeball” thinking is the basis for his [Obama’s] economic and foreign policies, from his schemes to nationalize the auto, banking, and health care industries to his lollygagging on behalf of those fighting for greater freedom in Iran.

In 1984, during her legendary convention speech, the late Jeane Kirkpatrick called people like this the “blame America first” crowd, explicitly noting their penchant to presume that Western culture, and American culture in particular was domineering, tyrannical, so overpowering that it had become a source of justified resentment. America speaks of lofty ideals, they claim, but fails to live up to them and thereby exploits its position in the world, becoming a force not for good, but for cruelty and domination. This is the refrain of many on the left since at least Vietnam. And given Barack Obama’s personal and educational history, including his relationships with many renowned and avowed blame-America-firsters, the presumption is that he too sees this country’s faults first and its strengths only much, much later.

Certainly there’s at least a hint of truth in such claims concerning Obama’s motivations. And given this, we reserve the right to return to the subject ourselves at a future date.

But that said, we think that there may be a simpler reason, one that most of the philosophical and cultural explanations seem to miss. It is possible, we think, or even likely, that Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States, is dubious of American exceptionalism not because he believes that the country fails to live up to its ideals, but because he believes that its ideals are not worth living up to.

Let us explain.

If you look at the President’s behavior over the past few weeks, specifically regarding the world’s troubled spots, it is clear that he is, at the very least, uncomfortable with the idea that popular sovereignty

is necessarily indispensable or that it somehow constitutes the superlative form of governance. In Iran, he was eventually shamed into scolding the Mullahs for their barbarity, but even as he did so, he expressed his hope that the tiny ruling clique would recognize his outreach efforts and agree to negotiate with him once the protesters had been dispatched.

In Honduras, his rejection of the popular will and the institutions of democracy has been even more deliberate and less reserved. That nation’s Supreme Court, Congress, armed forces, and ruling party all concluded that President Zelaya was actively and aggressively trying to undermine the national constitution and to accrue power for himself at the expense of the people and the constitutional order, and so they acted to remove him from power. And Obama’s reaction – his forceful, quick, and meddlesome response – was to condemn and bully those who stood against tyranny. In Iran he would not meddle for fear of angering the dictator, but in Honduras, he would happily and readily meddle, though on the dictator’s behalf.

It should not surprise anyone paying even the slightest bit of attention over these past few weeks that the attitudes demonstrated by the President on the matters of Iran and Honduras are anything but unique. Indeed, throughout the brief course of his presidency, Barack Obama has prided himself on his leerness of democracy and his willingness to look beyond popular sovereignty to assess the broader picture. In a piece written before the Iranian election and published by *Commentary*, Joshua Muravchik noted (in his title nonetheless), Barack Obama’s “Abandonment of Democracy.” Muravchik wrote:

The new president signaled his intent on the eve of his inauguration, when he told editors of the *Washington Post* that democracy was less important than “freedom from want and freedom from fear. If people aren’t secure, if people are starving, then elections may or may not address those issues, but they are not a perfect overlay.” . . .

Obama seems to believe that democracy is overrated, or at least overvalued. When asked about the subject in his pre-inaugural interview with the *Washington Post*, Obama said that he is more concerned with “actually delivering a better life for people on the ground and less obsessed with form, more concerned with substance.”

Last week, the screenwriter and blogger Roger L. Simon noted Obama’s “strange friends” and even stranger behavior with regard to Iran and Honduras and wondered whether Obama could not be classified as “objectively pro-fascist,” as Orwell had once labeled pacifists. Simon took some heat from various corners, many of which noted Orwell’s own, later repudiation of the idea that one can be judged solely by the unintentional effects of his ideas and behavior. And that’s all fair, as far as it goes. But the fact still remains that Simon was not wrong; Obama’s actions in the last few weeks have, indeed, aided the “fascists” in Iran and Honduras, even if unintentionally. More to the point, it is eminently reasonable to conclude that the disclaimer about intention is unnecessary.

To be fair, perhaps the term “pro-fascist” is misleading, though pro-authoritarian seems, to us, perfectly just. As we ourselves noted just two weeks ago, Obama seems to have taken enthusiastically to the general Western drift away from government of the people, by the people, and for the people, preferring instead that “the people” just shut up and let their betters tell them what to do.

To be clear, we are not suggesting, by any stretch of the imagination, that Obama is a tyrant or that he has any intention of arresting, torturing, imprisoning, or slaughtering his political enemies. Nor are we suggesting that he is untroubled by the use of force by foreign nations against their own people. The hard left harbored such fantasies about the previous president, to be sure. But the suggestion that Obama (or Bush, or any other American president) might wish ill on his fellow countrymen or would enjoy seeing innocents slaughtered is patently absurd.

No, Obama’s authoritarianism is, at least in his eyes, of a benign and pragmatic variety. “People” tend to get in the way – of negotiations, of alliances, of plans, of policy. And thus people, to the extent that their desires conflict with the greater good, should be silenced, or at least ignored. And all of this is done *for their own good*.

In Iran, the people were complicating his plans to win over and negotiate a peaceful agreement with the Mullahs and their political agents. In Honduras, the people and their elected agents were further aggravating an already aggravated region of the world and complicating efforts to make nice with Cuba and Venezuela. The people were in the way. And they were making a mess of things.

And note here that Obama’s apparent belief in the primacy of the purported authorities and the role of the people as dutiful subjects is not limited to international affairs or the conduct of foreign governments. Again, as we noted two weeks ago, when one looks at Obama’s plans for health care, for “climate change,” for industrial and energy policy, for any of a host of other matters, his desire is to give the people what he believes is best for them, whether they like it or not.

Recently, the historian and classicist Victor Davis Hanson noted the similarity in attitude and conduct between Barack Obama and his allies and the “Guardians” in Plato’s *Republic*. To wit:

In his *Republic*, Plato outlined an elaborate, ranked utopia, a good city (“*Kallipolis*”) run by a sort of benign natural selection. The philosopher-kings sat atop hierarchies in which occupations were assigned for the citizenry. To justify arbitrary selections, the rulers would make up “noble lies” about divine edicts, making clear that the occupations chosen for lesser folk were god-given.

Once the inferiors understood that there were divine sanctions behind their lot in life, they would feel happier. And society

at large would benefit by each worker's having the proper aptitude for his occupation. The larger point Plato was making was simply that sometimes an all-knowing elite must hedge on the truth to convince the ignorant public what is good for it . . .

So why does President Obama so often get history wrong, so often call for utopian schemes he would hardly adopt for himself, and so often distort by misinformation and incomplete disclosure?

Partly the culprit is administrative inexperience, partly historical ignorance. But mostly the disconnect comes because Barack Obama believes he is a philosopher-king, whose exalted ends more than justify his mendacious means.

As countless commentators, historians, and analysts have noted, Obama is hardly the first or only "progressive" to feel the need to save the people from themselves. Indeed, the entire history of the "progressive" movement is that of elites seeking to substitute their views of the common good for that of the people, to improve the station of the masses for their own good, democracy be damned. In a recent piece, the historian Paul Rahe explained that this urge dates back at least a century to Woodrow Wilson:

Back in 1912, when Woodrow Wilson successfully ran for the presidency, he told his compatriots, "We are in the presence of a new organization of society." Our time marks "a new social stage, a new era of human relationships, a new stagesetting for the drama of life," and "the old political formulas do not fit the present problems: they read now like documents taken out of a forgotten age." What Thomas Jefferson once taught is now, he insisted, quite out of date. It is "what we used to think in the

old-fashioned days when life was very simple." Above all else, he hoped to persuade his compatriots to get "beyond the Declaration of Independence." That document "did not mention the questions of our day," he told them. "It is of no consequence to us. It is an eminently practical document, meant for the use of practical men; not a thesis for philosophers, but a whip for tyrants; not a theory of government, but a program of action" – once of use, outdated now.

You see, the blessings of individual freedom, the guarantees to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, all of the wonders contained in the Declaration and the Constitution are secondary in importance to the smooth and "rational" functioning of society.

It should be remembered here, that in addition to being one of the key figures in the Progressive movement, Wilson was, of course, also the father of American public administration, which is to say that he is the author of the belief that the "science" of administration could be used to perfect, or at least radically improve government's delivery of services. Wilson is also, for all intents and purposes, the father of the "politics-administration dichotomy," which is the belief that the business of administration should not be sullied by the messiness, distortion, and potential corruption of the political process, i.e. elections, voters, and democracy.

The politics-administration dichotomy has been nearly universally rejected by students of public administration, specifically because of its undemocratic nature. But despite its dismissal among academic practitioners, the idea of such a dichotomy still appeals greatly to politicians, to "reformers" of all stripes who see themselves as the possessors of rational ideas that will cure all the public's woes, if only the public can be convinced – or ignored if necessary. And Barack Obama, the bringer of change, the most enthusiastic and unabashed reformer in recent memory, is no exception. Indeed, he is anything but.

Over the weekend, as a prelude to Obama's trip to Russia, the White House made a stunning, though largely ignored concession. President Obama, who fancies himself a realist, despite his overwhelmingly unrealistic and naïve beliefs about human nature, foreign affairs, and nuclear weapons in particular, has decided that a new nuclear arms treaty with Russia must be reached before the expiration of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (START), irrespective of the means necessary to reach one. ABC News has the details:

With the clock running out on a new US-Russian arms treaty before the previous Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START, expires on December 5, a senior White House official said Sunday said that the difficulty of the task might mean temporarily bypassing the Senate's constitutional role in ratifying treaties by enforcing certain aspects of a new deal on an executive levels and a "provisional basis" until the Senate ratifies the treaty.

Now, just to reiterate, the Senate's role in approving treaties is not a whim or the result of some silly 1970s era law designed to rein in executive power. It is a CONSTITUTIONAL requirement, one that Obama feels justified in "bypassing" in order to do what is best, in his opinion, for the people of the country. For our part, we don't wish to get into the merits of nuclear arms treaties, though we sympathize with the President's desire to renew a treaty that has been in effect since the end of the Cold War. Still, the arrogance and gall necessary to believe that Constitution itself may be bypassed in the pursuit of noble ends are precisely the characteristics that could lead one to conclude that the president is utterly unconcerned with the nation's constitutional democracy, with its constituents, and even with those constituents' representatives, even despite the fact that a super-majority of them hail from his own party.

In President Obama, we see the distillation and acceleration of a number of trends that have informed our analysis over the last several years. He possesses

the arrogance and the short-sightedness of the Gnostic; the moral plasticity of the post-modernist; the detestation of the masses and the faith in rational and scientific administration of the bureaucratic extremist; and the crushing urge to bypass the people in pursuit of the common good of the benign authoritarian.

As we noted two weeks ago, Obama is hardly the progenitor of any of these fundamentally undemocratic sentiments. But he is, in a very real sense, their most forceful and skilled advocate, in this country at least. He is, as he has admitted, less concerned with form than substance, even if that "form" is the very foundation of this nation and its exceptional place in world history.

Barack Obama is not, as many believe, a man who hates America and that for which it stands. He is, rather, indifferent to it. And that, in many ways, is far, far worse.

CARITAS IN VERITATE.

This morning, the Vatican released the long-awaited and much-anticipated papal encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, "Charity in Truth." The timing of the release is both interesting and unfortunate: interesting because it comes on the eve of the G8 summit and unfortunate becomes on the eve of the G8 summit, which is to say on the eve of Pope Benedict XVI's first meeting with Barack Obama (or as David Blosser has aptly titled him, His Holiness, President Barack Obama).

What little discussion the mainstream press will dedicate to the encyclical is therefore bound to be painfully shallow and focused not on the truths and wisdom enunciated by the Pope, but on any superficial connection to Obama. The broader public is all but certain, given this, to be subjected to a misleading and stilted interpretation of this most important document. Already, for example, *US News and World Report* has speciously concluded that "If Benedict's encyclical argues that moral shortcomings precipitated the world economic crisis, as seems likely to be the case, it could line up with Obama's own interpretation of the recession." Yikes.

Before commenting too volubly on the encyclical, we will wait until we have had the chance to read it more carefully and, more to the point, to read and digest the interpretations offered by those far better qualified than we to address such matters. In the meantime, though, we'd like to offer just a few, hopefully relevant comments on the political, social, and especially economic consequences of Pope Benedict's issuance.

For starters, it appears to us that those who were hoping that the Pope would set forth a broad-sided critique of markets and market economies are bound to be intensely disappointed. If anything, it appears to us that Pope Benedict's reading of the markets and market forces is akin to that of Adam Smith. Among other things, the Pope notes that a functional economic system must be based on a moral code, and a specific moral code at that. He writes:

The economy needs ethics in order to function correctly – not any ethics whatsoever, but an ethics which is people-centred. Today we hear much talk of ethics in the world of economy, finance and business. Research centres and seminars in business ethics are on the rise; the system of ethical certification is spreading throughout the developed world as part of the movement of ideas associated with the responsibilities of business towards society. Banks are proposing “ethical” accounts and investment funds. “Ethical financing” is being developed, especially through micro-credit and, more generally, micro-finance. These processes are praiseworthy and deserve much support. Their positive effects are also being felt in the less developed areas of the world. It would be advisable, however, to develop a sound criterion of discernment, since the adjective “ethical” can be abused. When the word is used generically, it can lend itself to any number of interpretations, even to the point where it includes decisions and choices contrary to justice and authentic human welfare.

Much in fact depends on the underlying system of morality. On this subject the Church's social doctrine can make a specific contribution, since it is based on man's creation “in the image of God” (Gen 1:27), a datum which gives rise to the inviolable dignity of the human person and the transcendent value of natural moral norms. When business ethics prescind from these two pillars, it inevitably risks losing its distinctive nature and it falls prey to forms of exploitation; more specifically, it risks becoming subservient to existing economic and financial systems rather than correcting their dysfunctional aspects.

Those looking for papal rapprochement with the modern global left are also likely to be incredibly disappointed. In addition to the declaration of necessity moral certainty above, the Pope spends a great deal of time in the encyclical subduing the beast of relativism, as he has done before:

I am aware of the ways in which charity has been and continues to be misconstrued and emptied of meaning, with the consequent risk of being misinterpreted, detached from ethical living and, in any event, undervalued. In the social, juridical, cultural, political and economic fields – the contexts, in other words, that are most exposed to this danger – it is easily dismissed as irrelevant for interpreting and giving direction to moral responsibility. Hence the need to link charity with truth not only in the sequence, pointed out by Saint Paul, *of veritas in caritate* (Eph 4:15), but also in the inverse and complementary sequence of *caritas in veritate*. Truth needs to be sought, found and expressed within the “economy” of charity, but charity in its turn needs to be understood, confirmed and practised in

the light of truth. In this way, not only do we do a service to charity enlightened by truth, but we also help give credibility to truth, demonstrating its persuasive and authenticating power in the practical setting of social living. This is a matter of no small account today, in a social and cultural context which relativizes truth, often paying little heed to it and showing increasing reluctance to acknowledge its existence . . .

Let it not be forgotten that the increased commercialization of cultural exchange today leads to a twofold danger. First, one may observe a *cultural eclecticism* that is often assumed uncritically: cultures are simply placed alongside one another and viewed as substantially equivalent and interchangeable. This easily yields to a relativism that does not serve true intercultural dialogue; on the social plane, cultural relativism has the effect that cultural groups coexist side by side, but remain separate, with no authentic dialogue and therefore with no true integration. Secondly, the opposite danger exists, that of *cultural levelling* and indiscriminate acceptance of types of conduct and life-styles. In this way one loses sight of the profound significance of the culture of different nations, of the traditions of the various peoples, by which the individual defines himself in relation to life's fundamental questions. What eclecticism and cultural levelling have in common is the separation of culture from human nature. Thus, cultures can no longer define themselves within a nature that transcends them, and man ends up being reduced to a mere cultural statistic. When this happens, humanity runs new risks of enslavement and manipulation.

Lastly, at least for today, the Pope addresses the fundamental importance of the individual and individual liberty in a properly functioning and charitable society, something that appears, to us at least, to strike at the core of the government focused, collectivist and utilitarian program of the current American administration, as detailed in the piece above.

Integral human development presupposes the responsible freedom of the individual and of peoples: no structure can guarantee this development over and above human responsibility . . . Only when it is free can development be integrally human; only in a climate of responsible freedom can it grow in a satisfactory manner.

And:

In the global era, economic activity cannot prescind from gratuitousness, which fosters and disseminates solidarity and responsibility for justice and the common good among the different economic players. It is clearly a specific and profound form of economic democracy. Solidarity is first and foremost a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone, and it cannot therefore be merely delegated to the State.

As we said, there is certainly more to come, just not today. Pope Benedict XVI, like his predecessor has met head on the challenges posed by the moral and cultural sloppiness of the modern world. And he has done so in support of the individual soul, its liberty, and its dignity.

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