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THEY SAID IT

Whenever I see a man, especially a rich man, endeavouring to rise and to acquire consequence in society by standing out as the especial champion of the poor, I am always reminded of an old acquaintance of mine...who made a comfortable living, and amassed an opulent fortune by administering the funds to the poor.

Among the strange notions which have been broached since I have been on the political theatre, there is one which has lately seized the minds of men; that all things must be done for them by the government, and that they are to do nothing for themselves. The Government is not only to attend to the great concerns which are its province, but it must step in and ease individuals of their natural and moral obligations. A more pernicious notion cannot prevail.

Look at that ragged fellow staggering from the whiskey shop, and see the slattern who has gone there to reclaim him; where are their children? Running about ragged, idle, ignorant, fit candidates for the penitentiary. Why is all this so? Ask the man and he will tell you, "Oh, the Government has undertaken to educate our children for us. It has given us a premium for idleness, and I now spend in liquor what I should otherwise be obliged to save to pay for their schooling"...Sir, is it like friends of the poor to absolve them from what Nature, what God himself has made their first and most sacred duty?

John Randolph of Roanoke, Virginia, Proceedings of the Virginia Convention of 1829-1830.

RIOTS, WELFARE, AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE POST-MODERN STATE.

Read enough about the London riots, have you? Certainly there's been enough ink spilled on the subject over the last two weeks to flood the Thames. But to the best of our knowledge, no one has yet placed blame for the explosion of violence, lawlessness, and rebelliousness, where it belongs, which is to say squarely on the shoulders of King Henry VIII. Henry VIII, you ask? Yes! Of course! Let us explain.

As is well known, in the early 1530s, the disagreements between King Henry and the Holy See over the likelihood of his ever being granted an annulment from his queen, Catherine of Aragon, grew more and more contentious, leading eventually to a full break between London and Rome. King Henry was, naturally, excommunicated, and in response, he and Parliament officially established the Church of England.

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Somewhat less well known is the effect that this break with Rome had on the poor of England. The collapse of the Roman Catholic monasteries and religious orders in England led rather directly to the collapse of much of the private charity in the country as well. And that, coupled with the dissolving economic condition throughout the 16th century – attributed to everything from poor harvests to the influx of American silver – created a state of affairs that was intolerable, even for the most stern and taciturn of rulers.

By all accounts, Queen Elizabeth I was indeed quite stern, yet in 1601, she presided over the implementation of what can fairly be called the world's first nationalized welfare system, with the establishment of the Act for the Relief of the Poor, also known as the Elizabethan Poor Law or, more commonly, simply the English Poor Law. And so began England's slow but steady decline into the welfare state . . .

Of course, when we write “slow,” this is a term of some nuance. Within two hundred years, some of the best known and most historically significant observers of politics and economics had noticed the crippling effects of the Poor Law on the English lower classes. David Ricardo, Jean-Baptiste Say, Edmund Burke, and Dr. Samuel Johnson, among others, noted these deleterious effects, citing “idleness” among their chief complaints. In 1798, the much and often-wrongly maligned Thomas Malthus also noted the negative impact of the law on the poor, writing that:

The poor laws of England may therefore be said to diminish both the power and the will to save among the common people, and thus to weaken one of the strongest incentives to sobriety and industry, and consequently to happiness.

Nearly 40 years later, in his *Memoir on Pauperism*, Alexis de Tocqueville, known best for his keen and enduring observations of the American political landscape, made perhaps the most trenchant and the most pertinent observations about the effects of the

burgeoning English welfare state, describing both how the condition of the poor was irredeemably wounded and the how the relationship between the poor and the well-off was irreconcilably broken. Tocqueville was not, we should note, particularly hard-hearted. But he was, as we know, keenly observant. And his observations here were biting:

At first glance there is no idea that seems more beautiful and grander than that of public charity . . . At the same time that it assures the rich the enjoyment of their wealth, society guarantees the poor against the excessive misery. It asks some to give of their surplus in order to allow others basic necessities. This is certainly a moving and elevating sight . . .

Unfortunately, he continued, “experience . . . destroys these beautiful illusions.” Private charity, Tocqueville wrote, is the willing act of man providing for his fellow man, sharing voluntarily from his wealth to enable and empower his less fortunate neighbor. This act, he said, “establishes valuable ties between the rich and the poor,” a “deed [that] itself involves the giver in the fate of the one whose poverty he has chosen to alleviate.” Moreover, he said, “the latter . . . feels inspired by gratitude.” But the involvement of government in that transaction destroys both its inherent nobility and the bond that would otherwise exist between giver and receiver. “Public charity” serves simply to “inflamm society's sores,” to create class envy and hatred, and to lay the foundation for what we know today as “class warfare”:

The law strips the man of wealth of a part of his surplus without consulting him, and he sees the poor man only as a greedy stranger invited by the legislator to share his wealth. The poor man, on the other hand, feels no gratitude for a benefit that no one can refuse him and that could not satisfy him in any case Far from uniting these two rival nations, who have existed since the beginning of the world and who are called the rich and the poor, into a single people, it breaks

the only link which could be established between them. It ranges each one under a banner, tallies them, and, bringing them face to face, prepares them for combat.

Less than fifteen years after Tocqueville wrote these words, nearly the entirety of Europe – save Britain – was awash in the spirit of revolution. The nationalistic, democratic, and especially socialistic origins of the revolution terrified Europe’s ruling classes, despite the fact that the uprisings were ultimately squashed. The response of the collective ruling class was essentially to discard everything about which the likes of Tocqueville, using England as an example, had warned them against. In order to spare themselves what they feared would be the ravages of the next revolution, they prepared to pre-empt it and, essentially, to do to their own poor what the Poor Law had done to the less fortunate in England, only on a grander scale. And thus they began to implement their own mass welfare states, famously led in this effort by Otto von Bismarck of Germany, with the advice of his immensely dense economist, Gustav von Schmoller.

The British, of course, followed suit, fearing their own poor would react badly to being left behind. England too chose to discard the warnings of Tocqueville, Burke, Ricardo, Say, and the like, opting instead, with the Reform Act of 1832, to expand the power of the poor to lobby on their own behalf. And by the turn of the century the English had greatly “modernized” and expanded their national welfare system. In 1911, the National Insurance Act was passed, and by the end of the Second World War, the most comprehensive and opulent welfare state in the history of humanity had been established and consolidated. The task begun by Elizabeth I was completed, though its impact on the British people had only just begun.

Obviously, we have neither the time nor the space here to discuss that impact in any great detail. It should suffice to quote a few select passages from the inimitable Mark Steyn, whose new book contains a chapter on the collapse of what he calls “post-Great” Britain. In his column last weekend, he summarized parts of that chapter thusly:

The London rioters are the children of dependency, the progeny of Big Government: They have been marinated in “stimulus” their entire lives. There is literally nothing you can’t get Her Majesty’s Government to pay for. From page 205 of my book:

“A man of 21 with learning disabilities has been granted taxpayers’ money to fly to Amsterdam and have sex with a prostitute.”

Hey, why not? “He’s planning to do more than just have his end away,” explained his social worker. “Refusing to offer him this service would be a violation of his human rights.”

Why do they need a Dutch hooker? Just another hardworking foreigner doing the jobs Britons won’t do? Given the reputation of English womanhood, you’d have thought this would be the one gig that wouldn’t have to be outsourced overseas.

While the British Treasury is busy writing checks to Amsterdam prostitutes, one-fifth of children are raised in homes in which no adult works — in which the weekday ritual of rising, dressing, and leaving for gainful employment is entirely unknown. One tenth of the adult population has done not a day’s work since Tony Blair took office on May 1, 1997.

Those are staggering numbers. Some 20% of British households have no working adults. None. Zip. Zero. Zilch. Another 10% of adults haven’t worked in 15 years. That’s as long as the Melcher-Soukup team has been collaborating to bring you incisive and insightful political commentary. That is, in a word, shocking. Or it would be if Malthus and Tocqueville hadn’t prepared us. And even as it is, it’s still a little difficult to wrap one’s head around those numbers.

In order even to attempt to do so, to attempt to make sense of any of this, one must keep in mind at least two important things. First, in Britain as well as the rest of the Western world, the state has come to comprise far more than just the means of governance. And second, the fundamentally critical variable in the metastatic growth of this post-social-contract state is, as Tocqueville noted, the insatiability of the welfare classes once they've tasted the benefits of public charity. This is not, we are at pains to stress, to impugn the character of any and all who have ever been on welfare. It is rather merely to note, as Tocqueville did, that once the poor man, in the abstract, is provided *by the state* with a benefit, for nothing in return, that benefit quickly and forever becomes one that "could not satisfy him in any case."

Theodore Dalrymple, the pseudonymous retired British prison physician, psychiatrist and political commentator, noted precisely this insatiability in his recent examination of the pathologies behind the London riots:

The riots are the apotheosis of the welfare state and popular culture in their British form. A population thinks (because it has often been told so by intellectuals and the political class) that it is entitled to a high standard of consumption, irrespective of its personal efforts; and therefore it regards the fact that it does not receive that high standard, by comparison with the rest of society, as a sign of injustice. It believes itself deprived (because it has often been told so by intellectuals and the political class), even though each member of it has received an education costing \$80,000, toward which neither he nor—quite likely—any member of his family has made much of a contribution; indeed, he may well have lived his entire life at others' expense, such that every mouthful of food he has ever eaten, every shirt he has ever worn, every

television he has ever watched, has been provided by others. Even if he were to recognize this, he would not be grateful, for dependency does not promote gratitude. On the contrary, he would simply feel that the subventions were not sufficient to allow him to live as he would have liked.

What Dalrymple goes on to describe and what anyone familiar with the modern welfare state understands intrinsically is something that neither Tocqueville nor any of contemporary fellow critics of the poor law could have foreseen so long ago, at the dawn of the modern nation state. That being that the feckless and morally vapid post-modern and post-religious political classes would go their predecessors in the post-1848 generation countless steps better, in part for fear of disturbing the poor, rousing them from their welfare-induced stupor, and in part out of the arrogance and self-satisfied righteousness that springs from the belief that only they possess the knowledge and the virtue necessary to right the wrongs of a perverted society.

Last week, in a *New York Times* op-ed piece, Richard Sennett and Saskia Sassen, a married couple and a pair of academic sociologists, gave voice to the standard leftist line in response to the British riots: the violence is the result of budget cuts and it can and will be repeated anywhere in the Western world in which welfare budgets are touched, no matter how slightly or how unavoidably. Specifically, they wrote:

The American right today is obsessed with cutting government spending. In many ways, Mr. Cameron's austerity program is the Tea Party's dream come true. But Britain is now grappling with the consequences of those cuts, which have led to the neglect and exclusion of many vulnerable, disaffected young people who are acting out violently and irresponsibly — driven by rage rather than an explicit political agenda.

America is in many ways different from Britain, but the two countries today are alike in their extremes of inequality, and in the desire of many politicians to solve economic and social ills by reducing the power of the state.

Britain's current crisis should cause us to reflect on the fact that a smaller government can actually increase communal fear and diminish our quality of life. Is that a fate America wishes upon itself?

This amazingly stupid comment by two intelligent people who are deemed, by today's standards, to be educated, is exasperating, telling, smug, condescending, and embarrassingly belittling. Yet, it is a largely truthful account of the welfare state dynamic and the relationship between the welfare state and the Tea Party.

As the *Times*' token conservative columnist, Ross Douthat, points out, the "cuts" that have Drs. Sennett and Sassen up in arms constitute, at most, cutting Britain's public sector "from 45 to 50 percent of national GDP" to something more like "40 to 45 percent of GDP." And, as others have noted, this "reduction" will be accomplished as most spending "cuts" are accomplished here in the United States, simply by slowing the rate of growth of the welfare budget relative to the budget as a whole. All of which is to say that the drastic, horrible, no good, very bad cuts that have liberals so perplexed and that are the apparent "understandable" source of these riots are not cuts at all. They do not constitute any real form of deprivation for those who would be affected, but are merely a perceived deprivation relative to that which welfare recipients – and, apparently, the ruling classes and leftists – believe they are entitled.

Even more damning than this absurd notion, that a benefit once bestowed is a benefit bestowed in perpetuity and in escalating sum, is the idea that a benefit need yield nothing in return other than tranquility. To this end, Douthat writes that Sennett

and Sassen have given away the game, essentially conceding that the point of the welfare state is not, contrary to the usual leftist cant, to improve the lives of those whom it cossets. The point, rather, is simply to buy the lumpen proletariat's appeasement:

[Sennett's and Sassen's] op-ed leaves the strong impression that that we should be wary of cutting government spending not so much because it necessarily improves the prospects of the poor, but because it serves as a kind of contemporary Danegeld: A price worth paying to buy off the young men with track suits and smartphones who would otherwise inflict random violence against their own neighbors and communities.

In a sense, Douthat is absolutely correct. Welfare is, more or less, approached by the ruling classes today much as it was in the aftermath of the 1848 revolutions, as a means by which to placate the erstwhile riotous lower classes.

In another sense, though, Douthat misses the more appropriate analogy, completely disregarding the alternate moral structure that the state represents in the post-modern mindset. When Elizabeth I was forced to institute a state welfare regime, she produced a secular substitute for an erstwhile religious welfare regime and thereby added an exclusively moral dimension to the function of the state that had not previously formally existed. For several decades, if not centuries, this went largely overlooked because of the correlation in England between the church and the state. But this was merely coincidental, and as the state and society continued to grow increasingly secular, the spiritual vacuum was filled with devotion to that secular state and to a moral structure positing the virtuousness of the state's deeds.

The original religious welfare regime offered both temporal relief and the promise of salvation that was other-worldly. And while the state could promise nothing comparable, it could and did offer temporal

deliverance that was far more complete, far more indulgent, and required far less of its subjects than had its religious progenitor. In a very real sense, then, welfare had become in full what Queen Elizabeth had initiated it to be, i.e., a surrogate salvation. All of which is to say that while Douthat sees welfare as something of a protection racket, it is, in our estimation, more accurately seen as part and parcel of the moral basis of the secular state. In the post-modern secular moral code, in other words, welfare is the opiate of the people.

You see, whether Sennett and Sassen or Labour Shadow Health Minister Diane Abbott or former London Mayor “Red” Ken Livingstone or any of the other of the rioters’ defenders know it or not, the violence in London is directly related to the violence in Athens. And it is directly related to the violence in Milwaukee and Philadelphia, where racial mob attacks have erupted over the last several weeks. And all of this violence is, indeed, part and parcel of the budget cuts in Britain, of the austerity budgets forced upon the Greeks, and of the budget-cut debate that surrounded the American debt-ceiling negotiations.

Under the weight of its unsustainability, the modern welfare state is collapsing before our eyes. And as it does, the moral code that both produced that state and underpinned it is collapsing as well. And since that moral code was itself established to fill the void left by the banishment of traditional morality by the Western intelligentsia, there is, for the time being, nothing else to take its place, save violence and chaos.

While the overwhelming majority of the commentary on the riots has focused on the rioters, on their crimes, and on their potential motivations, some smaller portion of the reports have, instead, addressed the police response to the violence, or, to be more accurate, to the police non-response to the violence. In an August 11th piece for the *Wall Street Journal*, Anne Jolis, an editorial writer for the *WSJ* Europe, told the sad tale of Kamran Raif and his brother’s grocery store:

Kamran Raif sits in front of the smashed windows of his brother’s store in north London. It’s Tuesday night, your correspondent needs soda, and this is the only 24-hour grocery within a mile.

A can of Red Bull at his side and fists jammed into his parka, 29-year-old Mr. Raif watches and waits. Like most of London after the previous three nights of mayhem, our stretch of Islington is tense but still.

The night before, at approximately 9:30 p.m., between 30 and 40 teenagers broke into the shop and left with all its liquor, cigarettes and cash. Mr. Raif, his brother and a handful of customers were inside at the time.

“I saw them coming and started to lock the doors, but they kicked through the glass and forced the doors open. All the customers ran to the back and my brother called the police,” he recalls.

The storefront comes with a metal shutter, but the lock had been broken since Mr. Raif’s brother bought the business four years ago. They never felt the need to fix it until this week.

Once inside, the looters snatched six-packs of Supermalt from the shelves nearest the entrance and hurled them at the cigarette and alcohol cases behind the register. To Mr. Raif they appeared to be 16 or younger and sober. He doesn’t know if they were kids from the neighborhood, but despite their hoods and balaclavas he could tell “from their hands” that his looters were mostly white.

“They were very shameful. It was a horrible experience,” he says.

The police never did appear . . .

According to Miss Jolis, Raif is willing to cut the police some slack, conceding that “They were busy. I know.” But the fact of the matter is that busy or not, they would have done nothing much to help him, largely because that’s what they trained, instructed, and ordered to do: nothing much.

Perhaps the most exasperated and therefore the most poignant account of the police response was given by the blogger and author Brian Micklethwait, who, on August 9, wrote the following:

One of the more depressing things about these riots is the way that the only thing that the Police can think of to say to us non-looters and non-arsonists is: “Don’t join in” and “Let us handle it”. If the bad guys start to torch your house, let them get on with it. If they attack your next door neighbour, don’t join in on his side. Run away. Let the barbarians occupy and trash whatever territory they pick on and steal or destroy whatever property they want to.

There was a fascinating impromptu TV interview with some young citizens of Clapham last night, not “experts”, just regular citizens, one of whom stated the opposite policy. Law abiding persons should get out of their houses, he said, en masse, and be ready to defend them.

The trouble with “letting the Police do their job” is that in the precise spot in which you happen to live, or used to live, their job probably won’t start, if it ever does start, for about a week. In the meantime, letting the Police do their job means letting the damn looters and

arsonists do their job, without anyone laying a finger on them, laying a finger on them being illegal. This is a doomed policy. If most people are compelled by law to be only neutral bystanders in a war between themselves and barbarism, barbarism wins. The right to, at the very least, forceful self defence must now be insisted upon.

Micklethwait’s post, combined with the declaration by British Home Secretary Theresa May that the police wouldn’t use water cannons because “the way we police in Britain is through consent of communities,” reminds us that the attack on and the effective ruin of traditional morality in the West left a void that was not filled consistently or effectively by any of its post-modern aspirants. The chaos of the rioters and the excessive and absurd regulation of those who might otherwise be expected to stop that chaos can and do exist side-by-side and can and do compete to displace one another as the dominant morality in a morally obtuse society. Or, as the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre put it in his classic study of the post-modern assault on tradition, *After Virtue*:

[Politics will] oscillate between a freedom which is nothing but a lack of regulation of individual behavior and forms of collectivist control designed only to limit the anarchy of self-interest. The consequences of a victory by one side or the other are often of the highest immediate importance; but, as Solzhenitsyn has understood so well, both ways of life are in the long run intolerable. Thus the society in which we live is one in which bureaucracy and individualism are partners as well as antagonists. And it is in the cultural climate of this bureaucratic individualism that the motivist self is naturally at home.

What we are left with, then, is a moral code that is clearly collapsing even as it oscillates – sometimes temporally, sometimes between segments of

society at the same time – and in which the rot and disintegration are visible and obvious not just in the rioters, but in the state’s response to them as well. The bureaucratic morality of the administrative state, the libertine morality of the welfare state, the cohesion and distinction between the two – all are collapsing as the financial footings of the state that support them also begin to give way. The money is gone. Indolence and bureaucratic paralysis reign. And yet there are still some – a majority even – who want simply to close their eyes and wish the chaos away or, better yet, to blame it all on those rare political factions that desire to do something before the collapse is irreversible.

Fifteen months ago, when we first predicted that our nation and the Western world more broadly were headed into a protracted period of civil war, this is precisely what we had in mind. We weren’t entirely sure how violent or how bloody the war would be, but we knew that it would ravage Western civilization as it has evolved over the last half century. The modern welfare state is a fine idea in theory, but it is a disaster

in practice. There are simply not enough resources to go around. And, moreover, the moral code that undergirds the state is highly suspect and itself unstable and based not on eternal principles but on the whims, preferences, and feelings, of the individual. As MacIntyre put it, in this post-modern welfare state, “what once was morality has to some large degree disappeared.”

This is the way it ends, gentle reader. The welfare state collapses upon itself in a fit of bureaucratic stupidity, libertine debauchery, and financial impoverishment. Short of mustering the unforeseen will to change the course of the seemingly inevitable, all the social welfare paradises of the West will eventually meet the same fate, to some extent or another, with some degree of resistance or another.

These riots, of course, shall pass and shall largely be forgotten. This is not Britain’s last stand. Not by any means. But it is a taste of things to come. For all of us.

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