

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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STIRNER VS. MARX REDUX

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Last week, I said that part of my lack of confidence in predicting the outcome of the upcoming presidential race was due to a change that I see occurring in the great American "swing" vote. I said then that I would discuss this issue in a future article. So here goes.

The term "swing vote" is commonly used by pollsters to describe people with no permanent party affiliation. They are the self-described "independents." They are comfortable voting for either party. They vote "for the man." This is a huge group, possibly as much as 40% of the electorate. Since there is never any doubt how committed Republicans and committed Democrats will vote, and since these two categories are roughly equal, it is these "undecideds" who decide American elections.

I misread this group when I was predicting up until mid-summer of 1992 that Bush would beat Clinton. Looking back, I now think my mistake was that I didn't realize that the swing vote crowd had changed dramatically in the past decade or so.

In the not-to-distant past, this group was reasonably easy to figure because it was a fairly homogeneous lot. It was made up primarily of older, white, middle class blue-collar workers, the Joe Six Packs of the nation and their wives. For the most part these people were ethnic Catholics who reside in the big cities of the North, and Southern and Western Protestants.

The bulk of these individuals called themselves Democrats, but they were "conservatives" in the sense that they were proud of what they had achieved and were anxious to conserve it against a variety of threats, most of which they strongly identified with Democratic liberals. These included skyrocketing federal taxes to pay for government programs that seemed to have no relevance to their daily lives (or to anything else for that matter), and a growing government advocacy of the rights of minorities, with whom these people competed for jobs and housing. They were highly suspicious of what they considered "radical" movements, whether these involved women, gays or African-Americans.

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This crowd always voted for the conservative when the Democrat was an unabashed liberal. They voted for Nixon and Reagan, and for Bush in his first race. They believed in "family values." They were moderately religious. They weren't bigots, but they believed strongly in the right of association. They believed that customs and traditions were important. They voted for Carter because he was religious, yet "progressive." They voted for Reagan the first time because he wasn't Carter. They voted for him the second time because they liked him.

The coming of political age of the entire baby boom generation, accompanied by rapid change in the nation's moral and ethical norms, and in its cultural and ethnic makeup, has prompted a realignment in the American political spectrum. As a result, the importance of the old "swing vote" crowd has diminished significantly. Some members have died. A large share of the rest have permanently chosen sides, recognizing the wisdom in the reply Al Smith offered to a friend who once told him: "To tell you the truth, Al, this election campaign has not helped me to make up my mind." Smith's response was: "To tell you the truth, Charlie, if you need an election campaign to make up your mind, you must be a dumb sonofabitch."

In the place of this old swing vote crowd, there has emerged a new, large group of "undecideds" who are, I think, much more difficult to read because they are capable of believing almost anything, or nothing, at any given moment. They are reminiscent of a remark by G. K. Chesterton that people who have lost their faith, "do not believe in nothing, they believe in anything."

It is impossible to tell how large this group is. But assume that there are 80 million baby boomers and that, like the rest of the population, half of them are political stoneheads who don't vote and don't care. Then let's say that 10 million of the 40 million who do vote are committed liberals, based on such issues as "choice," environmentalism, their occupation, their race, or a simple belief in the efficacy of government. And let's say that another 10 million are committed conservatives, based on a distrust of government, or possibly as a result of having taken an economics course.

This would leave 20 million "undecideds," a big group when one considers that only 105 million or so Americans voted in 1994. It is big enough to make the difference in the 1996 race, if a large majority of this crowd votes for the same candidate.

By definition, members of this group are neither liberals nor conservatives. If they have a common characteristic, it is that they are distrustful of all institutions: religious, political, and governmental. Their ambivalence, even antagonism, toward organized religion makes them wary of the GOP. But they also have a strong anti-government streak, based largely on the fact that their paychecks are hit immensely hard to pay for programs that provide them with few if any recognizable benefits.

They consider themselves to be compassionate, and entertain benevolent sentiments about abstract entities such as "the poor," the "downtrodden," and "oppressed minorities." But they are quintessentially the "me" generation, and their personal commitment to any of these causes is minimal. In fairness, part of this relates to the fact that during their lifetimes the government has assumed most of the responsibility for addressing any and all suffering or hardship that any U.S. citizen might encounter. There are therefore a limited number of avenues through which they

can actually act on any noble thoughts that might occur to them, so fewer and fewer occur each day.

This crowd tends to view politicians the same way they view pop celebrities. They want entertainment. They liked Reagan because he had panache. They like Clinton because he is a personality. His indecisiveness, along with rumors of moral and ethical breaches, present no problem for them. They generally believe that there are no moral absolutes; that, in the words of former Clinton Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders, "everyone has different moral standards" and that this is just fine.

I'm not talking here about uninvolved dummies. This group is educated by today's standards. They vote. Indeed, they are likely to become excited about a presidential election once it begins to be discussed on late night TV. They consider themselves to be politically well informed, even though most couldn't describe the Mayflower Compact, The Federalist papers, the "New Deal," the "Great Society," or identify Winston Churchill.

Most get their news from "alternative sources," such as MTV, and their outlook on the world from the network sitcoms, late night television, and from pronouncements by celebrities. They are extremely well informed about all aspects of pop culture. They are experts on movies, which many consider to be an art form; or as George Grant, Canada's brilliant political philosopher noted, for them art and entertainment are indistinguishable.

Politicians have a love-hate relationship with these new "undecideds." In some ways they are perfect because they are easily influenced by sound bites. But they have short attention spans and are fickle.

Much has been written about why and how Bill won in 1992. In my opinion, a principal reason was that his campaign employed one of the best persons in the nation for communicating with this new "swing" crowd. This was Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, creator of such popular TV shows as "Designing Women," "Evening Shade" and "Hearts Afire." *Time Magazine* once described her as "the closest thing TV has to an advocacy producer," and quoted her as saying: "I have my own column on TV, and I take it as seriously as does Mike Royko or David Broder."

I doubt the Bush gang even knew that this group existed. In any case, Bush was incapable of fighting for their hearts and minds because the GOP's two most brilliant media strategists were not part of his campaign. Lee Atwater had died of brain tumor a year earlier and Roger Ailes had gone to work for Rush Limbaugh.

This new "swing" group can be a nightmare for pollsters, since members subscribe to no religiously defined belief system that would provide stability to their opinions. They are capable, for example, of being adamantly opposed to the death penalty one day, and supporting it the next, after watching a particularly gruesome episode of "Cops."

My guess is that this group comprises most of the 10% or so of the population who told pollsters that they didn't think Clinton was doing a good job before he gave the speech after the explosion in Oklahoma, but afterward said they thought he was doing great. This phenomenon decisively

demonstrated that a 10% swing in popularity can occur overnight, based on one speech during a highly emotional moment.

How then can anyone confidently predict the outcome in 1996? One great speech that happens to connect, or an impassioned endorsement by a pop singer, and bingo! Or possibly, one of the candidates could discuss the kind of underwear he wears on MTV, or play a saxophone on a late night talk show.

I know some people will maintain that this group either doesn't exist as a political entity, or that, if it does, it is temporary; that most of these folks will eventually join one side or the other and fade away as a political entity, or simply drift around aimlessly, with no permanent impact on the system.

This is, of course, possible, even probable. But, for sake of argument, and to have a little fun this week, lets consider the possibility that these new political nihilists will become a permanent political archetype in America, and that they will have lasting and profound impact on the political system.

To support this argument, I would note that these people are not simply lost souls in search of an ideological home. They represent a real philosophical belief system, even though the vast majority of them may not know it, and even though individually they represent only pale versions of it.

This system is supported by an organized intellectual juggernaut that actively teaches and promotes the kind of political nihilism, personal cynicism, and extreme egotism that the actions of this group exemplify. I am referring, of course, to the post-modernist movement, which, through its growing stranglehold on America's higher education establishment, has spread its putrid influence across the nation.

Gertrude Himmelfarb, one of the nation's most brilliant observers of American society, describes this movement in a superb article entitled "Academic Advocates" in the September *Commentary*. According to Himmelfarb, the animating spirit of post-modernism is a "radical skepticism and relativism that rejects any idea of truth, knowledge, reason, or objectivity . . . and refuses even to aspire to such ideas, on the ground that they are not only unattainable but undesirable--that they are, by their very nature, authoritarian and repressive."

Himmelfarb maintains that post-modernism is "the most influential, and perhaps the most enduring, of all the fashions that have afflicted the university in recent times." She says it has "swept though the academic disciplines--literature most conspicuously, but also history, philosophy, anthropology, the law." The following quotes from her article provide additional flavor.

The very idea of a discipline of history is regarded as disingenuous or hypocritical. Similarly, the idea of fact (the word now appears almost invariably in quotation marks) is derided, as are the ideas of truth, objectivity, and reality. What passes as history, like all forms of knowledge, is presumed to be a "construct" of the "hegemonic" class.

There is no truth to be derived from history--not even partial, incremental, contingent

truths. There is no objectivity--not even an approximation of it or any reason to strive toward it. There are not even any events--only "texts" to be interpreted in accord with the historian's interest and disposition, just as the text of a poem may be an occasion for the free-floating imagination of the literary critic. It is in this spirit that all the humanities have been relativized, subjectified, "problematized" (as the deconstructionist say)--and thus politicized. For if there is no reality, no truth, no facts, no objectivity, then there are only will and power."

Finally, Himmelfarb notes, "out of postmodernism, with its suspicion of logic as 'logocentric,' of reason as 'phallogocentric,' of objectivity as 'authoritarian,' there has emerged a new subjectivism--a new 'personalism,' one might call it--that exalts the scholar's own feelings, sensations, emotions, and private experiences." This, she notes, "is a prescription not for academic freedom, but for intellectual and moral nihilism."

It is also, I believe, although I hasten to add that Himmelfarb doesn't say this, a prescription for a new group of "undecideds" on the American political scene, a new "swing" group, whose members have trouble making up their mind because "everything is relative, man."

As I said earlier, the short-term impact of this crowd is to make elections more difficult to predict. Space won't permit an in depth discussion of the possible long-term effect, but I would like to make the following point on the subject before closing; as before, for the purpose of having a little fun.

In my opinion, the long-term danger of the existence of this large human residue of postmodernism 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 a brief historical backgrounder.

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 Engels and Marx.

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 the 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 Hippiel 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 Hippiel 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." *Der Einzige* is too complex to be detailed here. But the following quotes from James Huneker's description of Stirner's ideas in Huneker's delightful 1909 book, *Egoists* will give the flavor.

Our first enemies are our parents, our educators. It follows, then, that the only criterion of life is my Ego. Without my Ego I could not apprehend existence. Altruism is a pretty disguise for egotism. No one is or can be disinterested. He gives up one thing for another because the other seems better, nobler to him. Egotism! . . . The one sure thing of life is the Ego. Therefore, "I am not you, but I'll use you if you are agreeable to me" Not to God, not to man, must be given the glory. "I'll keep the glory myself" What is Humanity but an abstraction? I am Humanity. Therefore the State is a monster that devours its children. It must not dictate to me . . . Socialism is but a further screwing up of the State machine to limit the individual. Socialism is a new god, a new abstraction to tyrannize over the Ego . . . "crimes spring from fixed ideas." The Church, State, the Family, Morals, are fixed ideas. "Atheists are pious people." They reject one fiction only to cling to many old ones. Liberty for the people is not my liberty. Socrates was a fool in that he conceded to the Athenians the right to condemn him. . . . Your Ego is not free if you allow your vices or virtues to enslave it.

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 extraordinary book, *The Ruin of Kasch*, published by the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 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. It's fun to think about.

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