

The Political Forum

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

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Let The Big Dog Run
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Like a lot of people, I was surprised last week when that judge in Little Rock threw out the Paula Jones suit, although I must say that ever since the OJ decision I have not been really surprised by anything that happens in America's courtrooms.

Personally, I think Paula made the case, via extensive depositions from other women who have crossed paths with Bill, that her story was not just plausible, but likely. As such, I believe she deserved her day in court.

However, in the grand scheme of things, the Jones case was never pivotal. But it did serve the important function of strengthening Bill's critics in the great public relations skirmish, and of opening a new front for Independent Counsel Ken Starr in the legal war, which to paraphrase poet Alan Seeger, has always been the "disputed barricade" where Bill's rendezvous with history will be decided.

Increasingly, as the details of this scandal unfold, I, like many people, have been struck by the sharp schism that is developing among Americans over its importance. Designer coffee houses and unisex hair salons (we used to say bars and barbershops) ring with arguments over presidential morals, with an emphasis on "whether it matters." Newspapers teem with editorials on the subject, and the ubiquitous talk shows thunder with opinions from all angles. Pastors, priests and rabbis routinely address the issue, both obliquely and directly, during services.

Theories abound to explain why so many people find Bill's alleged antics to be acceptable. Most, including a few that I myself have put forth, involve various interpretations of attitudes toward events of the moment.

This week, my colleague Steve Soukup and I would like to offer a somewhat more complex, and we think more interesting, explanation. This one, we feel, is also more troubling, because it

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raises questions about whether the value system that underpins American society is significantly weaker than anyone had previously imagined.

This theory holds that the public controversy over whether Bill's alleged ethical and moral transgressions "matter" can best be understood as a battle between two competing moral systems, in a war that has been going on in Western society for at least 700 years.

One side in this conflict can be described as traditional Judeo-Christian. The foundation of this belief system 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 system espouses beliefs that are often referred to today as "post-modern." This system is roughly based on the concept that there are no ultimate, overarching truths, and that judgments about right and wrong are little more than the means by which some people control others, or as Nietzsche, an icon of the movement, put it, the outward expressions of will and power.

The only "sin" recognized by adherents to this system is making judgments about the choices of others. The concepts of "right" and "wrong" are considered to be wholly subjective. Individuals are encouraged to make up their own minds about such things, and neither society nor any person has a right to "judge" those decisions.

Bill's first Surgeon General, Dr. Jocelyn Elders, stated this view succinctly once when she was asked whether it was wrong for a teen-aged girl to have a child out of wedlock. She replied, "No. Everyone has different moral standards."

There is no way to measure how many Americans subscribe to, or lean toward, post-modernist thought. But it is surely quite significant, given the large number of people who tell pollsters that it is immaterial to them whether Bill did any or all of the things of which he is accused.

When viewed from this perspective, the election of an ethically and morally challenged president would not be simply an accident of history, like say the victory of Warren Harding in 1920, but would instead be evidence of the growing strength of post-modernism and the weakening of popular support for traditional notions of right and wrong.

If this were indeed the case, then it is worth keeping in mind that capitalism and democracy eventually become extremely corrupt in societies where ethical and moral guidelines are arbitrary. The late, great Russell Kirk, the founder of modern day American conservatism, made this point brilliantly, as follows.

A society in which men and women are governed by belief in an enduring moral order, by a strong sense of right and wrong, by personal convictions about justice and honor, will be a good society—whatever political machinery it may utilize; while a society in which men and women are morally adrift, ignorant of norms, and intent chiefly upon gratification of appetites, will be a bad society—no matter how many people vote and no matter how liberal its formal constitution may be.

Most Americans do not even know that post-modernism exists, much less that it threatens traditional society. This is largely because the most visible signs of the rot it produces are in academia, where its intellectual “leaders” reside. As a result, Steve and I thought we would provide a little historic background on the movement this week.

Scholars will argue about the exact origin of post-modern thought, but it is clear that the ideas that form the foundation of this system can be traced at least as far back as a group called the Brethren of the Free Spirit, which began during the 13th century in Europe.

Here, in a nutshell, so to speak, is how Norman Cohn, author of the remarkable history, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, explains some of that movement’s practices and beliefs. Parallels with today’s adherents to post-modernist thought are not perfect, of course, but the amorality, secular ambition, the ability to be unusually good liars, the treatment of women as sex objects, and the justification of certain sexual practices by odd biblical interpretations are startlingly familiar today.

What distinguished the adepts of the Free Spirit from all other medieval sectarians was, precisely, their total amorality. For them the proof of salvation was to know nothing of conscience or remorse . . . ‘Nothing is sin except what is thought of as sin’ . . . Between the closed community of the Free Spirit and the mass of unredeemed humanity lay an immeasurable and impassable gulf . . . in their eyes mankind in general existed only to be exploited . . . Hence the blithe dishonesty which, century after century, was noted as being peculiarly characteristic of these above all other sectarians. Calvin observed that it was one of the main articles of their faith that an adept must simulate whatever role would gain him most influence. And there is no doubt that these people really did develop an extraordinary skill in lying and pretense, which they deployed not only to protect themselves against their enemies . . . but to worm their way into the favour of simple souls.

As in the earliest days of the movement, one expression of this attitude was still a promiscuous and mystically coloured eroticism. According to one adept, just as cattle were created for the use of human beings, so women were created to be used by the Brethren of the Free Spirit. [From the 13th the 17th centuries] the same view is expressed again and again: for the ‘subtle in spirit’ sexual intercourse cannot under any circumstances be sinful . . . For all alike adultery possessed a symbolic value as an affirmation of emancipation.

It is important to keep in mind that, despite constant attempts by established civic and religious authorities to destroy the Free Spirit, the movement exerted significant influence and enjoyed substantial longevity. According to Cohn, it had adherents from Cologne to Silesia, exerted

influence as far away as Bohemia, and “persisted as a recognizable tradition for some five centuries.”

The first and most famous of the modern godfathers of “post modernism” would almost certainly be Jean Jacques Rousseau, the malevolent 18th century genius about whom Carlyle said, “he could be cooped into garrets, laughed at as a maniac, left to starve like a wild-beast in his cage;-- but he could not be hindered from setting the world on fire.”

Like the Brethren, Rousseau maintained that all social conventions were restraints on freedom. But he didn’t just rail against the church and the state. He described even the “sciences, letters, and arts,” as “garlands of flowers over the iron chains” with which men are laden, and said that they “throttle the sentiment” for freedom and “make them love their slavery,” by fashioning them “into what is called civilized Peoples.”

Among other things, Rousseau invented one of the bedrock concepts of modern day liberalism and post-modern thought, that being that moral character is not a function of how an individual conducts his or her personal life, but on how strongly he or she “cares” about others. Richard Rorty, a prominent post-modernist philosopher and frequent guest at the White House, presents the 20th century form of this idea when he maintains that the mere “expression of liberal opinions guarantees personal innocence in a cruel world.”

My friend Claes Ryn, Chairman of the National Humanities Institute, describes it thus in his wonderful book *The New Jacobism, Can Democracy Survive*.

Their virtue is that they entertain benevolent sentiments for various abstract entities, such as “the people,” “mankind,” “the proletariat,” “the poor,” “the downtrodden,” “the starving third world,” or the like—categories that are all comfortably distant from the emoting person and which therefore impose no concrete and personally demanding obligations on the individual. Still, this sentimental posture of caring contains a pleasant ingredient of self-applause. It is, as it were, morality made easy. It presupposes no difficult improvement of self in actual human relationships.

Claes notes that this concept “lets individuals claim moral worth who show no particular signs of moral character in their actual conduct and who may, by traditional moral standards, actually be personally odious.” Rousseau himself claimed moral superiority, yet he forced his mistress, an illiterate maidservant, to drop off at an orphanage all five children she had by him immediately after their birth.

While Rousseau is without question an icon of post-modernism, Nietzsche is undoubtedly the purest link between this movement and the Brethren. To Nietzsche, history, truth, and reality were man-made, and like the Brethren, he repudiated moral norms. Nietzsche argued that “there are no eternal facts just as there are no absolute truths.” He once described truth as follows.

A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, a sum, in short, of human relationships which, rhetorically and poetically intensified, ornamented and transformed, come to be thought of, after long usage by a people, as fixed, binding, and canonical. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions, worn-out

metaphors now impotent to stir the senses, coins which have lost their faces and are considered now as metal rather than currency.

The path from Nietzsche to post-modernism is long and tortured, made even more so by the fact that post-modernist thought is highly obtuse, since their “truths” can’t be regarded as true even by themselves. Names that populate this historic rogue’s gallery include Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Michel Foucault, and of course, the above-mentioned Richard Rorty.

This is an extremely quarrelsome lot, whose writings and utterances are at variance with each other on virtually everything except their disdain for truth and for history. To them, the creation of historical reality involves judgment and is thus oppressive.

This later characteristic involves what is known as hermeneutics, the “deconstruction” of documents and actions to determine hidden meanings. The feeling is that there may be a number of multiple, differing interpretations of any given text, involving multiple complementary conclusions, none of which may be considered invalid. In hermeneutics, truth and fact are unimportant, and any and all interpretations of texts (or of history, if you will) are, by their very nature, valid. No interpretation is “wrong,” though some may be “deeper” than others.

The great modern moral philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, discussed the problems this odd approach to inquiry creates in his remarkable 1990 book *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, as follows.

It is not that there are no shared points of reference, no common ground, with the classical positions . . . Foucault’s use of Flaubert . . . make[s] it plain that that is false. But what is lacking is any adequately shared way of characterizing such common ground as there is . . . For the project is one of displacing at the outset and even before the outset that scheme which provided metaphysical and theological thought with its measure; hence no common measure with that thought can be acknowledged. Yet if incommensurability with classical thought is thus a prerequisite for the enterprise, how can there be conversation with it . . .

Now one would think that such a crowd would have little influence in a nation such as the United States, with its rich history of respect for transcendent truth. But one would be wrong. For just as the Free Spirit repudiated moral norms and rebelled against perceived oppressors, post modernists also rebel against their perceived oppressors.

In an academic sense, these are empiricists and behaviorists. In a greater sense, these are the same oppressors against whom the Free Spirit rebelled, the standard-bearers of traditional ideas, morals, and values. And like their medieval progenitors, post modernists too have enjoyed significant success that has generally gone unacknowledged as such.

Gertrude Himmelfarb recognized this success in a superb article in the September, 1995 issue of *Commentary*, when she described post-modernism as “the most influential, and perhaps the most enduring, of all the fashions that have afflicted the university in recent times.” She noted that the

movement has “swept though the academic disciplines—literature most conspicuously, but also history, philosophy, anthropology, the law.”

She notes that “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.”

These personal experiences, feelings, and what-have-you are passed along to students under the guise of scholarship; academic “advocates,” as Himmelfarb calls these post modernists, are no longer in the business of education but have crossed the line into indoctrination. And this, she writes, “is a prescription not for academic freedom, but for intellectual and moral nihilism.”

Himmelfarb doesn’t say it, but it is worth noting that post-modernism has also gained a major foothold in the nation’s art and literature, and also in the entertainment business, where most Americans today obtain their “culture.”

In short, post-modernism has had a tremendous impact on society, an impact that plays a significant role in the debate that rages around Bill Clinton. And anyone who pays close attention can discern, in the words of his defenders echoes of the thoughts of some of the most prominent members of this seven hundred year old iconoclastic movement.

Consider this thought from Nietzsche. “Cheerfulness, clear conscience, the carefree deed, faith in the future, all this depends . . . on one’s being able to forget at the right time as well as to remember at the right time.” Or this one from Paul de Man. “It is always possible . . . to excuse any guilt, since the experience always exists simultaneously as fictional discourse and as empirical event and it is never possible to decide which of the two possibilities is the right one.”

The title of this piece, by the way, offers another, less complicated theory, for public antipathy toward Bill’s alleged moral and ethical transgressions. This one holds that the public is merely echoing the viewpoint of Judge Susan Webber Wright (when she dismissed the Paula Jones case) as articulated by *Washington Post* columnist Tony Kornheiser. According to Kornheiser’s column last Sunday entitled, “There She Goes, Miss America,” Wright was simply saying, ‘Let the big dog run.’”

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