

What's Theory Got to Do with It?

The history of this young nation has known but a few transformational developments since its revolutionary birth: the Civil War primarily, but also the New Deal reforms and the broadening of civil rights in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The first transformation, the destruction of slavery, was the first and only change that profoundly restructured property relations in the US.[1] The New Deal, on the other hand, expanded the human rights manifesto beyond the eighteenth-century bourgeois deification of property and freedom of action, an expansion that nonetheless remains contested to this day with the continual erosion of the welfare state.

Where the New Deal proffered the additional universal rights to a job, to belong to a union, to food, etc.—what philosophers have come to call positive rights—the civil rights movements of the twentieth century expanded the notion of a citizen to include all those—women, former slaves—denied by the so-called founding fathers, the colonial elite.

Thus, the goal of establishing a bourgeois republic was not completed for nearly two centuries until the nominal full participation of women and African Americans was achieved with universal voting rights. Yet within two decades after the landmark voting rights legislation, any promise of popular and democratic expression had been decisively dashed by the powerfully persuasive role of money and media.

The newer information and entertainment technologies afforded the rich and powerful an overwhelming counter to the creaky machinery of universal suffrage and the myth of voter autonomy. What the bourgeois republic gave in opportunity, the opinion-makers took back with their consensus factories.

Allergy to Theory

Without an understanding of our nation's history, without theories that weave together events, without a broad and deep grasp of causes and effects, the past and the way forward are mystifying and disorienting. More importantly, without an over-arching theory that explains both the common and uncommon elements occurring in the course of US history, one can only despair at the future.

Certainly no hope for altering that course can come without that understanding. But searching for causes, making historical connections, and scrounging for general laws have seldom known popularity with our fellow citizens. Some, like Professor Richard Hofstadter, have attributed this allergy to theory to a long-standing anti-intellectualism. But the US overflows with intellectuals, both inside and outside of the universities.

Pundits of every stripe dominate the daily background noise, the written word, and the sport of national politics; they may not be intellectuals to my liking, but they are intellectuals nonetheless. No, the problem is an aversion to theory, an aversion born from both unique subjective and objective features of US history.

To a great extent, the dynamism of the young nation – its continued expansion and shifting frontier, the influx of waves of immigrants, the broken links with the patterns of European development, the perception of unlimited opportunity, and a host of other "exceptional" features—gave rise to the creed of American Exceptionalism, a view that the US stands outside of the patterns of development shared by other nations.

Put simply, the US is seen as making a new history apart from the old patterns; no theory is necessary to explain that which remains unsettled and indeterminate. From this stance of unique, exceptional social, political, and economic development came adherence to the philosophical framework of pragmatism and empiricism—a concern for the practical and the immediacy of experience.

In the US "theoretical" frame of reference, it is the individual, and not the family, neighborhood, work collective or any other social unit that stands at the center of the universe, a posture reinforced and made imperative by the rigors and discipline of an unfettered capitalism that trades on dissolving historically established social ties and identities.

Except on those rare occasions when Marxist or other collectivist theory-driven movements arise and intrude, our intellectuals celebrate the individual and eschew recognition of any laws of social, economic, and political development. Social life and its history are merely a swirl of sentiments, decisions, accidents and spontaneity, all guided by a quasi-religious sense of destiny.

An Example

A recent study circulating among progressives on the Internet demonstrates the poverty of this prevailing intellectual method in the US. Krishna Savani, a business professor at Columbia University, and Aneeta Rattan, a psychology professor at Stanford University, have authored a paper "explaining" the wide-spread, counter-intuitive acceptance of material inequality in the US.

The paper's title, while couched in the academic idiom, clearly states their conclusion: "A Choice Mind-Set Increases the Acceptance and Maintenance of Wealth Inequality." That is, the idea that outcomes are determined by choice and not circumstance, privilege, advantage, or prejudice trumps the indignity or sense of injustice people may have over material inequality.

Thus, people are less likely to attend to material inequalities when they believe strongly that life's outcomes are largely a matter of choosing wisely. They conducted experiments, the results of which showed that: ...highlighting the concept of choice makes people less disturbed by facts about existing wealth inequality in the United States, more likely to underestimate the role of societal factors in individuals' successes, less likely to support the redistribution of educational resources, and less likely to support raising taxes on the rich—even if doing so would help resolve a budget deficit crisis. These findings indicate that the culturally valued concept of choice contributes to the maintenance of wealth inequality.

The professors' conclusions neither surprise nor satisfy. Opinion polls show that US respondents vastly overestimate their relative position in society; in one poll, nearly two out of five believed that they are or will be in the top 5% of wealth holders, a view that is patently irrational and impossible of fact. Other polls demonstrate that US citizens have a vastly distorted picture of wealth and income distribution in the US, an ignorance that also informs their perception and valuation of inequality. While choice may be one element in the conceptual framework that devalues social justice, there are many others, including deception and simple factual error.

The radical empiricism and theoretical meagerness of the Savani/Rattan study implies that high estimation of individual choices is the decisive factor in the reluctance of US citizens to tackle the explosively growing inequalities in the US. Though the authors may not have intended it, the study leaves the pessimistic impression that the worship of choice (the preference of weighing opportunity over outcome) is deeply and perhaps intractably rooted in the US character.

As an example of social science practiced in the US, the study is impeccable: the numbers are transparent, the statistics are significant, and the experiments are replicable. But as a basis for policy or of robust understanding, the study is frustratingly spare and unhelpful.[2]

Most importantly, the study fails to answer the critical question: Would people really choose to place choice above other social values if they were fully informed and unbiased? Or is their embrace of the choice "mind-set" something foisted on them by tradition, peer pressure, media, or propaganda? Choosing to Choose? While millions of dollars and thousands of hours could be spent rigorously identifying the "mind-set" that allows citizens to shun policies that address wealth and income inequalities, such an effort would get us no closer to understanding how this mind-set came to be and how it can— if it can— be transformed.

But addressing these questions is not a career track for scholars looking for appointment or tenure at elite universities. Since it would make no sense, all things being equal, for people to freely and knowingly prefer a value (freedom of choice) over other values (equality, for example) that are clearly in their and nearly everyone else's best interest, we need a theory and not merely an experimental result to move forward.

One such theory—the Marxist theory—invokes the notion of a ruling class with its own distinct and anti-majority interests. On such a theory, and in contrast with the study's barren empiricism, most people elevate certain values above their own interests because still others, operating as a cohesive class, have the desire and means to impose their values upon the rest of us. They could and would, if necessary, impose their will through coercion, but they prefer to use persuasive mechanisms to achieve the appearance of consensus.

The Marxist theory takes it as axiomatic that the ruling class, enjoying a decided advantage in wealth and power, will fully exploit that advantage; it will exercise its wealth and power to market its own interests to those with conflicting interests. The ruling class addresses this project through the ownership of the means of mass persuasion and decisive control of the instruments of governance.

Thus, for a Marxist, the monopoly of the media, the indirect, but decisive control of the educational system, and the dominance of political voices and the options they espouse allow the ruling class to plant, nourish, and harvest ideas among the masses, ideas that run counter to the interests of the vast majority. One such idea, among many others, is the notion that individual choice is threatened by any policy that promotes egalitarianism.

The "Consensus" Mechanism at Work

Since the end of the Second World War, the US ruling class has pressed its interests over all others by successfully raising the specter of Communism, in the first place, and the threat of Islamic Fundamentalism, today.

Clearly, the anti-Communist hysteria was predictable as a gambit by the ruling class since Communists did indeed threaten to overthrow them. Subsequently, the success in portraying Communism as a threat to the nation, freedom, religion, and any other real or constructed value, allowed the ruling class to destroy any real domestic opposition and eviscerate the militant trade union movement. In a real sense, the left and the trade union movement in the US has yet to recover from this thorough and successful project of mass persuasion.

And since the threat of Communism has lost its credibility at this time, the US ruling class saw the necessity of creating a new bogeyman in Islam. Consolidation and monopolization of the mass media has enabled the deceptions and fantasies that were the building blocks of a false and alien world view shared by the majority of citizens even against their own interests. As new technologies arose and as they were more and more absorbed by giant monopoly media corporations, the bounds of independent thought grew narrower.

Even non-conformity became a calculated and manipulated phenomenon. A casual examination of network news, newspapers, and news services shows an uncanny similarity in coverage and point of view. A closer examination shows that the common point of view nearly always coincides with the point of view of elements of the ruling class; that is, whatever diversity is found in the national dialogue simply reflects the diversity of opinion among the ruling elite.

By purchasing the two contesting major parties, the ruling class decidedly controls the electoral arena in the US. It is not necessary for the rulers to send instructions. By merely funding the lobbying effort and shifting campaign contributions, the US ruling class determines the limits of discussion and debate.

As a result, a spectacle of largely — but not exclusively— white guys with professional degrees, expensive haircuts, near identical suits and ties, and flag pins gather to decide the direction of the country. Few see the bizarreness of this dance of puppets and even fewer recognize the puppeteers who pull their strings.

Theory and Change

The theory advocated here — the Marxist theory — has a long history back to its origins in the mid-nineteenth century. The fact that it captures and explains the behavior of many capitalist nations over many years bolsters its scientific credentials. The fact that it accounts for wars, economic crises, oppressive governmental acts, and massive transfers of wealth to the wealthiest — all counter to the interests of the vast majority—attests to its robust explanatory value. Those who have no theory have no explanation or answer for why a tiny minority can shape the course of history without regard to the interests of the majority and without resorting to coercion.

Rather than fueling pessimism and fatalism, the Marxist theory offers a way out. The profound economic crisis that surfaced in 2008 and continues unabated has damaged, disabled, or slowed the consensus mechanisms that have been operating smoothly and effectively for many, many decades; the mythologies created by these mechanisms are crumbling; and the tight grip on the "mind-set" of the US population is loosening.

While the political expression of these changes is retarded by habit, peer pressure, and sheer, naked opportunism, the underlying foundation of conventional political behavior is eroding.

Consider the following:

• All of the institutions of governance are at all-time lows in credibility and confidence according to numerous opinion polls.

• Similarly, sectors of monopoly capital are viewed extremely negatively, especially the financial industry.

• Likewise, opinion polls show new lows for the credibility of the mass media.

• The idea that every generation of US citizens does better than its forebears is shattered. This has been a pillar of American Exceptionalism.

• The axiom that education is the key driver of occupational success is crushed in a vice of fewer and fewer high paying jobs and escalating educational costs.

• Income and wealth inequality is too apparent to hide or dismiss.

• Several generations of young people have moved beyond the pollution of anti-Communism. The socialist option now has credible showings in opinion polls, especially among young people. Though these seeds of discontent are now deeply planted in the national "mind-set," the ruling class works feverishly to counter their growth.

Nonetheless, they will burst through. But we have no guarantee that the discontent will not be deformed by false populism, appeals to nativism, and personality cults. Those waiting for spontaneous risings may be shocked by what they get.

Instead, the moment is ripe for intensifying the battle of ideas. When politics lags behind the national sentiment, there is no better time to engage the ruling class and the false prophets. Regardless of how the forthcoming election turns out, this battle for shaping a genuine national interest remains. If we are serious about transformational change, we must follow the path of the abolitionists who came before.

We must show the same persistence and zeal for our cause and not be deterred by electoral sideshows, compromise, and maneuvering. For a left largely irrelevant to the outcome of the coming US elections, the moment to inject new ideas—anti-capitalism, socialism—is now.

The pitchforks will eventually come out; it's only a matter of who they skewer.

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[1] This is not to, in any way, discount the most important new world re-ordering of property relations: the wholesale expropriation of the property of the native inhabitants.

[2] Despite their "rigor," they expose their own theoretical bias by contrasting acceptance of choice over taxing the rich to pay down the deficit. It never occurs to them that paying down the deficit might be viewed as a bogus reason to re-frame taxation!