

A Sociological View of Obama's World of Social Justice

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In President Obama's much-discussed speech in Roanoke, Virginia, among his remarks on the source of success was his assertion that

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business--you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen. The Internet didn't get invented on its own. Government research created the Internet so that all the companies could make money off the Internet. ...¹

What is one to make of the President's celebration of the government's role in the personal pursuits of citizens and his diminishment of the causal connection between the productivity of individuals and the success of their pursuits? This essay locates the source of Obama's assertion in the influence on his thought of philosopher John Rawls' theory of distributive justice and philosophical pragmatism's theories of mind, self and society.² But I begin with what he asserts is the defining issue of our time: "Should we settle for an economy where a few people do really well and then a growing number are struggling to get by? Or do we build an economy ... where everybody gets a fair shot, and everybody does their fair share, and everybody is playing by the same set of rules?"³ The questions are to be expected from a president who believes that "When you are president ... your job is to figure out how everybody in the country has a fair shot ... Your job as President is to think about how do we set up an

equitable tax system so that everybody is paying their fair share, that allows us then to invest in science and technology and infrastructure, all of which are going to help us grow.”⁴

As earlier statements in his career indicate, Obama’s vision of paternalistic governance is the view he brought with him to the presidency. In 1998, as a first-term Illinois state senator, he argued that in order to insure that “nobody is left behind,” government systems must be more efficiently structured to “pool resources and hence facilitate some redistribution.” While on that occasion he underscored his proposal with the declaration that “I actually believe in redistribution, at least at a certain level,”⁵ as president he uses such euphemisms as “investment,” “giving back,” “giving everyone a fair shot” or “fair share” and “economic patriotism”—all of which imply redistribution by another name.

At first glance the ideal of “fair shares for all” suggests the requirement of a political and economic framework based on Karl Marx's distribution policy of “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.”⁶ But Obama's conception of fairness is not of classic Marxist origin. As noted, it is more a reflection of philosopher John Rawls' theory of justice and pragmatism's varied perspectives of the self-society relationship.⁷ His vision is a version of the altruist-collectivist social contract that Jean Jacques Rousseau proposed as the solution to the problem of constructing a society of freedom divorced from property ownership which he saw as the source of a war of all against all. His thought also includes the Progressive belief, as argued by William Allen White, that the solution to democracy’s problem of unleashed self-interest lies in overcoming the spirit of commercialism with the spirit of sacrifice.⁸

The Rawlsian Community of Equals

Obama's vision is a response to the failure of the American economy to realize John Rawls' difference principle. In Rawls' theory, society is a well-ordered "cooperative venture" organized like team for the mutual benefit of its members and regulated by "a public conception of justice" as "a set of principles for assigning rights and duties and determining the appropriate distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation."⁹ Although members are all equal as human beings, some on the team have been favored by nature with talent, intellect, ability, incentive, and performance that gives them an advantage over others. They naturally want to protect their advantage. Yet because their advantage is the result of nature's "luck of the draw," they agree to a standard of *justice as fairness* (the difference principle) which allows them to gain from their good fortune but *only* to the extent that their advantage improves the lot of those who were least advantaged by nature's lottery. Writes Rawls: "The higher expectations of those better off are just if and only if they work as part of a scheme which improves the expectations of the least advantaged members of society."¹⁰

Since justice in the Rawlsian world proceeds from the legislative authority derived from the united will of the people (evidenced by their high level of conformity to the redistribution norm), the state can legitimately force redistribution and the perception is that no injustice is done to anyone. This interpretation of the legitimacy of the state's forced redistribution is evident in the attitude of citizens like billionaire Warren Buffet who has the tax policy called the Buffet Rule named for him. As the White House describes the Rule: "No household making more than \$1 million each year should pay a smaller share of their income in taxes than a middle class family pays." It is presented as "a simple principle of tax fairness that asks everyone to pay their fair share."¹¹ The President was probably thinking of Buffet and others when he

said, “There are a lot of wealthy, successful Americans who agree with me--because they want to give something back.”¹² Although he acknowledges individual initiative, which the facts of his own biography impose on him, he defends the social justice framework by justifying its redistribution policy as a “give back” imperative of the “we’re-all-in-this-together” society.

The Cultural Context

Obama knows from his education that a political-economic framework that can execute the redistribution standard requires a cultural context in which social actors are guided by a shared view of themselves as embodying a “community of attitudes” or “collective conscience,” a concept that sociologist Emile Durkheim drew from Rousseau’s view of absolute commitment to the general will. By collective conscience Durkheim meant the totality of beliefs, sentiments, values, customs and norms common to average citizens that regulates the thoughts and actions of individuals.¹³ Rousseau argued that in order for people to be free from the dissensus caused by self-interest, inequality and exploitation, there must be “an absolute surrender of the individual, with all his rights and all of his powers, to the community as a whole.”¹⁴ The harmony and stability of the collectivist society envisioned by Rousseau and Durkheim depends on people viewing the constraints of society and the sovereign will of the state as the natural order of things. They must also transfer to civil society the commitment they had traditionally held for the sacred, and schools must teach children the importance of the political community’s claim to their loyalty and of their commitment to the morality of the collective.

In Durkheim’s view, commitment to the collective conscience is maintained through *attachment* and *social regulation*. Attachment to social groups and their goals, involving interpersonal ties and the perception that one is part of a larger collectivity, keeps people from

becoming too “egoistic.” Social regulation through political and legal controls, economic sanctions, and such instruments of control as persuasion, ridicule, stigmatization, gossip, opprobrium and ostracism limits individual aspirations and needs, and keeps them in check. Through attachment and regulation the will of each individual is merged into the general will of his group or the larger community, creating social cohesion and unanimity, in which “the deliberations of any one person are typical of all.” For Rousseau, the collapse of the boundary between private and public affairs would foster the commitment to public service as “the chief business of the citizens.”¹⁵

The greater the emotional and intellectual investment individuals make in sustaining the collective conscience and seeking the reward of social approval through their conformity, the more concerned they are about forces such as differentiation of groups and inequality that can undermine their sense of belonging and their reliance on an integrated and stable social order they take for granted and experience as something other than a human product. Nobel Prize-winner economist Joseph Stiglitz voices this concern in his argument that the greatest cost imposed on American society by the wealthiest one percent is “the erosion of our sense of identity, in which fair play, equality of opportunity, and a sense of community are so important.” It is their fault, he says, that “the chances of a poor citizen, or even a middle-class citizen, making it to the top in America are smaller than in many countries of Europe.”¹⁶

Advantaged members who share Stiglitz’s concerns and who want to avoid the loss of the community’s respect for them will conform to the redistribution expectation; they will accept the definition of their rewards as a public resource and comply with the state’s demand that they place them in service to the less advantaged through taxation and regulation. They will view

their compliance with forced distribution as a duty of citizenship, an act of “economic patriotism,” as Obama calls it, in the belief that doing so will contribute to the betterment of society. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, what Obama calls economic patriotism, was referred to as “social responsibility” which the business community embraced as “corporate social responsibility.”

A Cause Greater Than Self

In such an altruist-collectivist cultural environment that supports the statist framework of distributive justice, self-interest is erroneously understood to be necessarily in conflict with community.¹⁷ This false dichotomy has been a major theme in American political culture since the nation’s founding, but has grown more intense during the last half century. The question it raises regarding the self-society dimension of American citizenship was most recently posed by former president Bill Clinton before the 2012 National Democratic Convention. The kind of country Americans want to live in, argued Clinton, depends on their choice between a “you’re-on-your-own, winner-take-all society” and “a country of shared prosperity and shared responsibility—a we’re-all-in-this-together society.”¹⁸

In 2008 then-Senator Obama answered the question when he told the graduating class at Wesleyan University that their obligation to themselves was to recognize that “our individual salvation depends on our collective salvation.” He then called them to public service “because it’s only when you hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself that you realize your true potential and discover the role you’ll play in writing the next greater chapter in America’s story.”¹⁹ The depth of Obama’s belief in the altruistic ethic of serving a cause greater than oneself is evident in a letter to his daughters, published after his inauguration. His hope, he said,

was that they would work to right the wrongs they see and give others the chances they've had. "Not just because you have an obligation to give something back to this country that has given our family so much... [but] Because it is only when you hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself that you will realize your true potential."²⁰

In so saying, the President joined previous presidents who advocate the Christian-based ethos of Progressive Era that one has a personal responsibility for the problems of others, and the New Deal's policy that a person's problems justify his claim to the right to use the power of the state to force others to take responsibility for his problems. He told the students at Wesleyan that his work as a community organizer was inspired by John Kennedy's famous invocation to "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." His hope for his daughters could have been just as easily voiced by President George H. W. Bush who told the nation in his 1989 inaugural address: "We can find meaning and reward by serving some higher purpose than ourselves, a shining purpose, the illumination of a Thousand Points of Light... We all have something to give."²¹ His words also echo those of his rival for the presidency, John McCain, who wrote that "Love of country is another way of saying love of your fellow countrymen ... Patriotism is another way of saying service to a cause greater than self-interest."²² McCain's equation of sacrifice with patriotism was drawn, in part, from the code of "national-greatness conservatism" advocated by neoconservatives William Kristol and David Brooks. According to Brooks this new public ethos balances the distinctions between individual rights and community prerogatives and "marries community goodness with national greatness." As a "unifying American creed" it will "reinvigorate the nationalism of Alexander Hamilton, Henry Clay and Teddy Roosevelt," promote virtues such as "duty, loyalty, honesty, discretion, and self-

sacrifice,” and inspire Americans to subordinate their narrow self-interest to the larger mission of the country’s “national destiny.”²³

Since we can ennoble ourselves by freely choosing to assist others, one might think that in calling students and his daughters to public service, Obama was encouraging the virtue of generosity. But he promotes generosity as an obligation to which others are entitled, not as the voluntary practice it is. As Tibor Machan points out, like other true virtues, generosity is binding on one not as an obligation to others, but “as a matter of one’s own choice to live a full human life.” We have moral responsibilities to others, argues Machan, “not because those who might benefit are entitled, but because of our choice to live human lives within the company of others.”²⁴ In Obama’s perspective, as a member of the collective an individual’s moral worth is not sovereign, but dependent on serving the welfare of the collective. Thus, he promotes the cause greater-than-self credo as a rationale that justifies redistribution by equating it with generosity and compassion.

Writes Machan: “Those who demand that ‘generosity,’ ‘charity,’ ‘compassion,’ or kindness’ be legally secured by coercive governments—welfare statists, socialists, and to some extent communitarians—actually destroy the foundation of those moral virtues, by changing them from virtues into enforceable duties. They render the conduct as something the agent cannot choose freely, without being coerced.” The transformation of moral virtue into laws of coerced obligation by American presidents is evident in their use of tax dollars to finance various new federal bureaucracies to encourage the growth of volunteerism. Below are just a few of the vast network of bureaucracies promoting volunteerism erected by the three of the former presidents and Obama that are essentially instruments of redistribution that taxpayers fund in the name of

causes greater than themselves.

By 1995 George H.W. Bush's Points of Light Foundation had received \$26.6 million in federal funds--more than half its budget.²⁵ In 2002 President George W. Bush created USA Freedom Corps to build on the countless acts of generosity that followed Sept. 11, 2001; in his FY 2003 budget he requested more than \$560 million in new funding for the program. In a first executive order, Bush created the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives as one of the key policies of "compassionate conservatism." For FY2005, more than \$2.2 billion in competitive social service grants were awarded to faith-based organizations. In 2009 by executive order Obama renamed the office, The Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, and expanded its role. In 2009, he signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act (SAA) which reauthorized and expanded national service programs administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) that was established as a federal agency under Clinton in 1993. The expansion would cost about \$6 billion over five years, including the increase of the education stipend paid to volunteers to \$5,350, the same amount as a Pell Grant college scholarship.²⁶ To implement the SAA, Congress fully funded the President's FY 2010 request of a historic funding increase of \$1.149 billion.²⁷ His 2013 budget request to Congress included \$1.063 billion for the CNCS, an increase of \$13.8 million over the 2012 funding level.²⁸

That few Americans question the contradiction of such government funded volunteer service programs is an indication either of their indifference or their agreement with Obama's assertion that "our individual salvation depends on our collective salvation," and their perception of service, through taxation, to government-selected causes greater than self as somehow

ennobling.

Being A Pragmatic Collectivist

What kind of person would willingly conform to the redistribution standard and see no injustice in the forced sacrifice of the fruit of his or her advantages to the state-defined benefit of those designated by the state as less advantaged? The plausibility of such conformity rests on the individual's conception of himself or herself not as a self-responsible and morally autonomous individual but as the embodiment of the team and a carrier of the shared normative consensus that unites it. Such a person would have to possess a self-concept that is consistent with the theory of the self in pragmatist philosophy and social psychology.

Both perspectives reject classical liberalism's concept of the individual as possessing a nature given by nature prior to society. As social psychologist Charles H. Cooley asserted, "Human nature is not something existing separately in the individual, but... a relatively simple and general condition of the social mind." Man does not have human nature at birth, he argued, because "he cannot acquire it except through fellowship."²⁹ Philosopher and sociologist George H. Mead similarly claimed that although each self is different from every other self, "We cannot be ourselves unless we are also members in whom there is a community of attitudes which control the attitudes of all." The individual cannot have an independent idea because "one has to be a member of a community to be a self," and it is the organized attitudes of the community that make up a self.

Pragmatist conceptions of the self vary depending on the theoretical emphasis. Thus, in the belief that his or her human nature is socially determined, the individual who would willingly conform to the standard of distributive justice may conceive of himself or herself in several

ways: as John Dewey's "moral self" whose social conduct is guided not by independent judgment, but by the common interests that emerge from the social environment; as William James' multiplicity of selves ("I am as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize me"); as Cooley's "looking-glass self" ("I am my imagination of what you think I am"); as Mead's socialized self consisting of the internalized "generalized other" (society) that emerges from the process of taking on the role of the other ("I am the perspective of others"). All of these versions have been apparent or implied by Barack Obama's self-presentation in numerous political settings and circumstances. As he said of himself in his book, *The Audacity of Hope*: "I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views." His self-portrait confirms Erving Goffman's definition of the self as the product of a successful interactional performance "of a scene that comes off, and is not the cause of it."³⁰

In the Rawlsian welfare state it is the ability of the advantaged members of the team to role-take with the generalized other that enables them to conform to the expectation that they "give back" to society through redistribution, and to perceive the coercive distribution as just. The less advantaged are likewise socialized to conform to the redistribution expectation; they fully expect that their wants and needs will be met by others, and they expect those whose resources are redistributed to them to concur in this arrangement. After all, their economic, social and cultural assets are not theirs to own and allocate as they see fit, but are meant for the common good.

Given the necessity for a citizen of the Rawlsian society to perceive his self as socially determined, both the advantaged and the less advantaged would have to possess the kind of character that David Riesman called "other-directed." Although other-directed people vary in

their development, what is common to them all, writes Riesman, “is that their contemporaries are the [internalized] source of direction for the individual--either those known to him or those with whom he is directly acquainted through friends and through the mass media.”³¹ The other-directed person learns very early, though vaguely, that in any given situation his judgments should be made by doing the “best possible,” as defined by others in that situation. Through an exceptional radar-like sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others, he keeps in touch with them, pays close attention to signals from them and thereby maintains close behavioral conformity to their judgments. Thus, he grows up in an amorphous moral environment, in which “his conformity to others is not one of generalized [moral and intellectual standards] but of details--the minutiae of taste or speech or emotion which are momentarily ‘best.’”³²

Altruistic Intersubjectivity

As Riesman’s description of other-direction indicates, a crucial element of the other-directed self is the human capacity for intersubjectivity, the complex of empathetic understandings, implicit meanings and shared definitions of reality that are conveyed among people through symbolic gestures and language in the communication process. The “web of intersubjective relations,” as Jurgen Habermas called it, functions as a bridge between private world of the individual and the shared public world of others and makes possible mutual dependence.³³ This feature of the self-society relationship is a significant element of Obama’s practice of politics. On the campaign trail, he easily establishes intersubjectivity through language and gestures, such as spontaneous high-fives of voters. He projects empathy and mutuality with voters by presenting himself as the paternalistic servant of the people dedicated to protecting them from the profit-seeking rich who, as Vice President Biden, claimed, “don’t get

who we are.” Intersubjectivity also feeds his collapse of the boundary between the personal and the political, between the citizens and the state, between the private and public sectors.

Intersubjectivity is a necessary component of human communication and interaction. However, its normative content and pattern of behavior are dependent on the moral standard guiding the actors. Its effect in a person’s self-society relationship may be altruistic and collectivistic or self-interested and individualistic. The standard of distributive justice requires the context of altruistic intersubjectivity in which individuals relate to each other as the means to each other’s end, in which one has a duty to serve the interest of others. For instance, in this context, “we’re all in this together” could express the speaker’s belief that his self-identity is one with others (“I am the other”)—that there is no moral space between himself and those with whom he interacts, indeed with all of humanity. Such a collectivist orientation can be used to justify the welfare state’s moral hazard of encouraging people to engage in risky behavior in the belief that the costs of their behavior will be borne by others.

In a contrasting context of self-interested intersubjectivity, “we’re all in this together” could mean that our shared human existence depends on each person’s understanding of himself as self-generated and self-regulated (“I am the self I created”). Relations among such individuals are maintained on the shared assumption that each person is responsible for his moral autonomy and choices; their exchange of material and spiritual values is carried out in the understanding that no one expects from the other what he or she has not earned, and that no one will demand or accept the sacrifice of the other.³⁴

Because the social justice ethos requires the collapse of the moral boundary of personal jurisdiction between individuals and denying their moral sovereignty, its practitioners employ

intersubjective strategies that diminish or neutralize distinctions and gradations of social standing to confer equal status to all and blur the distinction between levels of achievement. If everyone is treated as equals, then individuals cannot use their differences to elevate themselves above others. This was the approach Obama took in his Roanoke speech. “I’m always struck by people who think, well, [my success] must be because I was just so smart,” he said. “There are a lot of smart people out there. It must be because I worked harder than everybody else. ... there are a whole bunch of hardworking people out there.” Such rhetoric implies what Richard Weaver called the perverted notion that “in a just society there are no distinctions.”³⁵ By evading individual distinctions, it also evades the reality of the hierarchy of values, and the necessary inequality of character, performance and achievement.

Just as conformity to the distributive justice standard involves the disconnection of material advantages from the person who has legitimately earned them, it also involves the severance of prestige and virtue. In the Rawlsian society, the advantaged who value the esteem of the team and want to avoid being penalized for their advantages may engage in “one-downsmanship,” defined by David Brooks as the practice of seeking prestige and respect by performing “a series of feints to show how little one’s worldly success means to you.” Brooks describes this phenomenon among the educated elite whose conversations are devoted “to mocking your own success in a manner that simultaneously displays your accomplishments and your ironic distance from them”:

... You will talk about your nanny as if she were your close personal friend, as if it were not just a weird triviality that you happen to live in a \$9000,000 Santa Monica house and she takes the bus two hours each day to the barrio. You will perfect a code that subtly

downplays your academic credentials so that if asked where you went to school, you will reply “Harvard?” with a little upward lilt at the end of your pronunciation, as if to imply, “Have you ever heard of it?”³⁶

Ayn Rand calls the symbolic leveling involved in one-downsmanship a type of “altruistic appeasement” which employs self-abasement to escape being reproached for one’s achievement or superior intellect. The individual apologizes for his intelligence and attempts to placate the resentment of the less endowed by dedicating his thought and resources to some social-altruistic goal.³⁷

Symbolic leveling is also practiced by associating with underdogs. In John M. Cuddihy’s analysis of the competition for “top underdog” status between Jewish and black intellectuals during the height of the black nationalism movement of the 1970s, he observed that according to the “cultural rating system, it helps, even if we are not ourselves victims, if we can ‘claim relationship with’ accredited victims. ...Success must be disguised, money—especially when it accumulates and gets old—must turn itself into taste and purchase art, or else, forswearing even its vulgarity, must retreat, covering its face with shame in the dark vaults of Morgan Guaranty Trust Company.”³⁸

The Bad Faith of Obama's Collectivism

The plausibility of Obama’s Rawlsian perspective and the collective conscience that supports the justice-as-fairness standard ultimately rests on the erroneous assumption that people who view their self-identity as socially produced have no choice but to perceive themselves and others in that way. Ultimately the legitimacy of the justice-as-fairness standard depends on compliance of other-directed citizens and whose worldview entails what psychologist Nathaniel

Branden identifies as “social metaphysics.” The social metaphysician, writes Branden, “holds the mind of other men, not objective reality, as his ultimate psychological and epistemological frame of reference.” This orientation is a form of psycho-epistemological dependency in which the person wishes to function in a context established by others and be guided by rules for which he or she has no ultimate intellectual or moral responsibility. For this individual the world is “reality-as-perceived-by-them,” and his or her interest is in obtaining the reward of social approval for uncritical conformity to that world. “In order to belong with others, the social metaphysician is willing to belong to them,” psychologically and intellectually.³⁹

Like the organicism that informed early sociology, social metaphysics assigns to society the ontological status of nature, and grants it necessity which, as a human creation, it does not possess. This error is an act of “bad faith,” writes sociologist Peter Berger, in that it “pretends something is necessary that is in fact voluntary.” It evades the fact that “Men are responsible for their actions. They are in 'bad faith' when they attribute to iron necessity what they themselves are choosing to do.”⁴⁰ Yet the implementation of distributive justice depends on the advantaged and the less advantaged accepting the bad faith that they lack the freedom as human beings to choose, and that they are therefore not responsible for their action and social situations.

An eloquent statement of this bad faith, one that clarifies the implications of Obama’s Roanoke declaration, is expressed by Trappist monk Thomas Merton’s self-abnegating assertion in *No Man is an Island* that, as a member of “one organism and ‘one body,’” Although Merton acknowledges that “the individual person is responsible for living his own life and for ‘finding himself’ [rather than] shifting responsibility to somebody else,” he then argues that

Only when we see ourselves in our human context, as members of a race which is intended to be one organism and 'one body,' will we begin to understand the positive importance not only of our successes but of the failures and accidents of our lives. My successes are not my own. The way to them was prepared by others. The fruit of my labors is not my own: for I am preparing the way for the achievements of another. Nor are my failures my own. They may spring from the failure of another, but they are also compensated for by another's achievement. Therefore the meaning of my life is not to be looked for merely in the sum total of my own achievements. It is seen only in the complete integration of my achievements and failures with the achievements and failures of my own generation, and society, and time.⁴¹

As Merton's argument indicates, the bad faith of social metaphysics negates the self-direction, self-regulation, and self-responsibility that are necessary to be successful in education, in business, in raising a family-indeed in any human pursuit. To credit the great teacher who guided one's education with one's success, as Obama did, without crediting the learning that only the student could initiate in pursuit of knowledge is to diminish the student's independent mind and moral agency, and to reduce him or her to the level of a passive dependent receptacle. As Branden points out, "Men learn from one another, but they cannot share the act of thinking; it is an individual, solitary process, not a social one."

Even without knowledge of the philosophical and sociological underpinnings of President Obama's thought, what many find so offensive about his "You didn't build that" assertion is that it removes them as the self-directed moral agents of their action and its consequence, and levels the all-important playing field of character. No doubt Obama's

comments triggered in many businessmen, innovators, parents, college students, athletes, and performing artists reflections on their experience of what David Riesman called the “nerve of failure--the courage to face aloneness and the possibility of defeat in one's personal life or one's work without being morally destroyed. It is, in a larger sense, simply the nerve to be oneself when that self is not approved of by the dominant ethic of a society”⁴² These indignant Americans object to the implication that the price of social life and prosperity is the surrender of their independent mind and judgment. Since, as human beings, they are distinguished by their rational capacity to initiate and regulate the thinking on which their survival in freedom depends, there can be no greater insult. If only implicitly, they know that because of the human requirement of a free environment, it is not the state-centered framework of *justice as fairness* that we require but the limited-government framework of *justice in liberty*.

NOTES