Critical Analysis

The United State of Egoism
By John N. Cooper
Feb 8, 2005, 01:36

In a recent Los Angeles Times commentary [http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-barber27jan27,1,56623.story] Benjamin R. Barber argues that the Bush administration's push to overhaul Social Security reflects a conflict current in America between the "Me" vs "We".

It's not just Social Security. It's neither the "I" vs "We" nor even the "Me" vs "Us". It's the far more ominously objectifying "us" vs "them". Over and over again, our culture currently revels in the triumph of individuals' concern for their own interests at the expense of the rest of society: in our foreign policy, our media, even our myth-making and story telling. Was the old West grounded upon the ruthless individualism of legal privateers or outlaws or by an interlocking community of settlers who cared and looked out for each other? Our present economic and political system seems designed to transfer and concentrate wealth and power from those who have the least to those who already have either in excess. Much is made about 'making' money, but that is not quite the right verb. 'Taking' money more accurately describes the process: as much as can be, by whatever means available, from whomever one can, while providing as little as possible in exchange without concern or regard for the victims of such exploitation.

The essence of market economics is that purchases determine what is interpreted as 'demand'. The assumption is that what is required for the general good is measured and signaled by what is bought, for how much. The effect is that, with the disparity between the purchasing power of the most wealthy and the least, the most acquisitive determine what is produced, at what price and for whom. Whether among individuals, classes or nations, those with the most disposable income, not those with the greatest need, determine what is produced. What is remotely 'democratic' about a system in which the least needy determine what society provides for all? In the politics of market place, polling is not by one 'man', one vote, but one dollar, one vote.

The result for market economies is that much productive labor is expended to produce a surfeit of goods of predominantly marginal utility to satisfy the demands of those with disposable income to spare. Further, as production is geared to manufacture an excess of whatever is produced, the market becomes glutted with things of marginal necessity. Consequently labor and effort is diverted from producing necessities to advertising, marketing schemes and come-ons, to stimulate otherwise insufficient demand for what is intrinsically unnecessary. Just walk down any suburban highway and count the gleaming rows of gashog vehicles crowding the sales lots, beseeching potential owners like so many plastic
and metal puppies in a petstore window. Meanwhile true needs, whether in this country or worldwide, go unrequited and unfulfilled.

The recently published "Limits to Growth: 30 Year Update" [ISBN 1-931498-58-X] offers the observation:

"When a country's elite believes it is acceptable to have large differentials in well-being within their nation, they can use their power to produce big differences in income between themselves and most of the citizenry. This inequality can lead the middle classes to frustration, anger and protests. The disruption that results from protests may lead to repression. Exercising force isolates the elites even further from the masses and amplifies among the powerful the ethics and values that justify large gaps between them and the majority of the population. Income differentials rise, anger and frustration grow, and this can call forth even more repression. Eventually there may be revolution or breakdown." This mechanism is seen to be even more operative when the differentials in well-being are BETWEEN nations, between 'us' vs 'them'.

In the current international climate, much is made of 'democracy' but what determines the outcomes of the legislative process in this country is far more strongly affected by corporate interests and their lobbyists than by the appeals of individual citizens. Like the economy, Congressional response to communal needs is dictated by whom, or which entity, can fund the most effective legion of lobbyists. Like market economics, the political process is not one 'man' one vote but, again, one dollar one vote. Now President Bush's proposed budget seeks to reduce spending on public health and social welfare to help pay for his tax cuts and the war in Iraq. In America the best government -- shabby, unresponsive and ineffectual though it be -- that money can buy is plutocracy: government of, by and for the wealthy.

The question is: why is the vast underclass of this country not rioting in the streets? Like the victims of the con of state lotteries in lieu of direct taxes to fund public programs -- many Americans are seemingly enthralled and seduced by the prospect that lightning will select them to be among those few elevated to fame or fortune. Separate and isolated from the common 'us', individual 'me's act on their own behalf contrary to the welfare and wellbeing of their cohort who then become just another 'them'.

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