

Barriers to Responsibility

The recently concluded war on Iraq is just the latest turn in the cycle of war and relative peace, which is driven by our government's quest for global hegemony. When the agenda of violence enters an active military phase, a portion of the citizenry awakens to rise up and express its indignation through various demonstrations, which inevitably leads another portion to react through counter-demonstrations of "patriotism". The cycle repeats itself, yet nothing fundamentally changes, except that the weaponry becomes more "sophisticated" allowing the violence to be sanitized for home consumption. This cycle of war, and the policies that drive it, are symptomatic of a social disease that lies deep within the body politic. It is a disease arising out of a complex interaction of social, political, and economic forces that are beyond the understanding of any one individual, but which could be controlled collectively if we shared a common ethic of citizenship.

We human beings like to think that we are above and superior to all other living things. The danger of this view is that it leads to a form of hubris in which we not only fail to appreciate the fact that we are a product of a continuing process of evolution through which most of our DNA has been inherited from our animal predecessors, but we also carry evolutionary baggage of an animal nature that may no longer be functional for survival. Alpha male behavior is an example of this evolutionary baggage, which was once again expressed upon the global stage. What makes us unique, however, is that we have the ability to understand and transcend the naked forces of biological evolution. Our systems of ethics are one of the primary means which make this transcendence possible. Ethics is a philosophy or system of thought that appeals to both our reason and sentiments for the purpose of achieving those goods that make it possible for us to live with one another and in balance with the rest of nature.

At the end of his best selling book, [The Road Less Traveled](#), M. Scott Peck discussed the fact that all of us, each and every one of us, are lazy. This laziness has nothing to do with the number of hours we work or our activity level. After all, we are a nation of workaholics and our activity level is so high that we work, produce, consume, pollute, kill, commute, litigate, advertise, build, and entertain more than any other society on earth. But while we are engaged in all this activity, we fail to contemplate the reasons for, and consequences of, our actions. This, I think, is what Peck meant when he said we are all lazy. We are ethically lazy. And if we fail to grow up and out of this ethical laziness, the survival of our species on this planet may not be possible, and even if it is possible, the conditions of life may be such that it will hardly be desirable. What is called for is an ethic of citizenship through which we not only assert our rights, but also assume our responsibilities. Asserting our rights has been less of a problem recently than assuming our responsibilities. The responsibilities I am speaking of here are our political responsibilities, the responsibilities that make us citizens. When we assume these responsibilities, we become free.

There are many barriers that make the assumption of these responsibilities difficult. One of the most basic barriers is fear. Whether we like to admit it or not, we are insecure; an

insecurity that is rooted in the fact that we are all going to die, we only don't know when. Perhaps one of the reasons we are so active is that it enables us to avoid reflecting upon this inevitability. But we are insecure for other reasons that derive from the fact that we are social animals. We crave both inclusion and recognition of our individuality. The tension arising out these impulses lie beneath much human behavior, and it is a source of the insecurity that results in the prevalence of ideological thinking. In extreme forms, ideological thinking leads to the "escape from freedom" and the "totalitarian impulse".

In addition to psychological fears, there are institutional arrangements that promote the avoidance of responsibility. Religion can do this through its appeal to an all-forgiving personal God who bestows salvation upon selected individuals. This process is difficult to recognize, because religion is seen as a source of moral behavior and hence responsibility. But with its emphasis upon the individual, or at most the community of believers, it fails to consider the possibility that individual salvation may depend upon the salvation of humanity as a whole. The idea of a messiah that is going to return and save the world can also lead to the avoidance of responsibility. If the world is going to be saved in the future, then we can avoid our responsibility for its care in the present. The modern variant of this messiah complex assumes that the "expert" and technological innovation will solve our problems. As the innovations of experts in nuclear physics make clear, technological solutions can create survival problems far greater than the original problem for which a solution was sought.

The ultimate institution of responsibility avoidance is the market. It is not surprising that market ideologies have tremendous appeal, because they raise the pursuit of self-interest from a natural tendency to a moral imperative. The individual is freed from moral concerns because Adam Smith's "invisible hand" will guarantee that the public interest will be served. I don't want to blame Adam Smith for institutional failures that are the result of market ideology. The market serves the public good when it is contained within its proper domain. But it becomes a malignant process when the idea of competition and winning at any cost becomes so extreme that market forces metastasize in each and every aspect of life producing domestic and global economic imperialism. What used to be the field of political economy with an emphasis on the primacy of the political is now the "science" of economics, which has obliterated the political through a transformation from the study of the wise use of natural and social resources to aseptic mathematical models of market equilibrium.

A byproduct of the market that has given rise to a radical form of responsibility avoidance is the limited liability corporation. Originally designed to protect the personal assets of an enterprising entrepreneur in assuming the risks associated with the creation of a business venture, the whole idea has been turned on its head. Now the corporate veil has become a device through which executives extort corporate assets from passive boards of directors in the form of elaborate compensation packages. These compensation packages have become so outlandish that the ratio between the highest and lowest paid employee in some corporations has reached a level of 650 to one. What is particularly obscene about these compensation packages is that they allow a few highly paid

executives to abscond with these assets intact after all the other employees have lost everything through corporate implosion as a result of executive mismanagement.

The economic power of the limited liability corporation has distorted the institution of election, which is another means through which citizens avoid their political responsibilities. Citizens avoid their political responsibilities by abdicating their citizenship to their “representatives”. But these “representatives” also avoid responsibility by using the claim that they are acting in the interests of their constituents as a subterfuge for adhering to the party line or the pursuit of hidden agendas that service particular special interests. The flaws inherent in the institution of election are numerous, and it is one of the major reasons for the capture of the political realm by economic interests.

In addition to the institutional barriers which impede the acceptance of political responsibility, our popular culture is infused with infantile notions of liberty, which promote possessive materialism and hedonism while denigrating aspirations of civic duty. The idea of liberty is complex and full of nuance, but in its mature form it involves the assumption by the citizen of moral responsibility for the type of society one wants to live in. This requires a serious effort to keep oneself informed regarding public affairs and a willingness to engage one’s fellow citizens in democratic deliberation. Liberty requires an ethic of citizenship which will provide the means through which the contradictions and opposing polarities of our present society can be brought into balance.

The above discussion glosses over complexities that have been the subject of numerous philosophical treatises. But the point is that the political decisions we make have ethical consequences. Even the decision to ignore the whole process is a political decision with ethical consequences. What is called for is a new system of representation through which citizens may engage in democratic deliberation to create the type of society they desire to live in. We have reached a crisis point in the history of our country, and the world, where, because of a citizenship vacuum, the market ideology of the neo-liberals has conspired with the quest for military empire of the neo-conservatives to let loose the forces of globalization through which the multinational corporation and financial capital are parasitizing the nation state and the institutions of government such that political action, and citizenship, may soon be rendered obsolete. If we are truly serious about the ideas and ideals of democracy and human progress, then we must also be serious about our citizenship.