Tag Archives: morality

BY GUEST AUTHORS | MAY 31, 2017 · 10:43 PM

Ramming Morality Into Our Economic System the John Ruskin Way

Tom Block, an artist and author of five published books, believes art is a vehicle for human rights activism; he connects 13th-century ideals of "legislative prophecy" with the present, looking for a moral center in politics, the economy, and social interactions. In this post, Block (who you can follow on Twitter at @tomblocko6 and learn more about at http://www.tomblock.com/) draws lessons from a 150-year-old book about the problems with and how to improve America's economic system.

Tom Block

Let's forget about Trump for a moment.

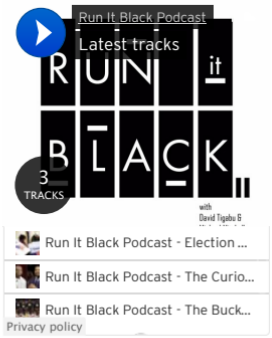
After all, as fun and exciting and different as his presidency is proving to be, he will not – in the end – change the course of human events. Even less so, of the economic pressures that aggrieve and threaten to crush us. Where Trump is a pimple on the butt of American history, our ongoing economic anarchy is a blistering, cancerous abscess affecting the fate of all of people.

I picked up a book the other day which threw the greed, inequality, lawlessness, and inhumanity of our Western capitalist system into stark relief. And given that this series of essays was written more than 150 years ago, at the infancy of the Industrial Revolution, I found it both prescient and deeply disturbing.

It diagnosed the creeping illness of the economic system of mid-19th century England, which so closely parallels our own, in 21st-century America. The only difference being that the ability for "economical science" (as the author called it) to wreak havoc on society and individuals has grown exponentially, keeping time with our frantic technological progress.

More than that, however, the slim pamphlet provides a potential palliative for this social illness.

Listen to Run It Black



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I'm talking about an 1860 series of four essays, "Unto this Last," by writer and philosopher John Ruskin. Ruskin set out to show how economic health concerns far more than the acquisition of "all useful and agreeable objects which possess exchangeable value" (Ruskin quoting John Stuart Mill). He laid out quite clearly that true economical well-being involves evaluating the totality of society, not just the amount of gold distributed among the fewest number of people (as seemed to define – and continues to delineate – the true state of "wealthy" nations). In his view, "just or economical exchange…is simply [that wherein there is] advantage on both sides [and] whatever advantage there is on either side…should be thoroughly known to all concerned. All attempt at concealment implies some practice of the opposite." He also chafed at the idea that people with different interests (for instance, labor versus capital, or client versus producer, etc.) must "necessarily regard each other with hostility, and use violence or cunning to obtain the advantage."

Obviously, this kind of transparency and fairness runs directly contrary to what is considered "sound" business practice. As many current chairmen of publicly held corporations would surely note, their obligation is to their *shareholders*, not to consumers, to the health of the environment or nation, or even their own workers. Isn't the idea of having an economic exchange which is of "advantage on both sides" not only absurd, but antithetical to good business practice?

It's a zero sum game, man! There are winners and losers in life – and we want to be on the side of the winners!

This dynamic of greed and self-justification stretches back to the beginnings of capitalism, often dated by historians to fourteenth-century England. As Ruskin argued, those in power "never professed, nor profess, to take advantages of a general nature into consideration." Instead, they believe they are simply experts at "the science of getting rich…Every man of business knows by experience how money is made, and how it is lost," they'd argue.

Ruskin has an easy reply to this line of reasoning – one that all progressives should keep handy when arguing economic theory with the smarmy and self-certain advocates of economic anarchy ("deregulate the banks!" "deregulate the corporations!" "eviscerate environmental protections!" "never, ever raise the minimum wage!," etc.):

> The circulation of wealth in a nation resembles that of the blood in the natural body. There is one quickness of the current which comes of cheerful emotion or wholesome exercise; and another which comes of shame or of fever. There is a flush of the body which is full of warmth and life; and another which will pass into putrefaction.
>
> As diseased local determination of the blood involves depression of the general health of the system, all morbid local action of riches will be found ultimately to involve a weakening of the resources of the body politic.

And so it is: as the inequality of wealth accretes (as it certainly has since the presidency of Ronald Reagan, he whose name graces an airport, a federal building and perhaps, some day, the dime), the health of the nation, as well as the environment upon which the nation sits and depends, weakens. And so too, if we can judge by the growing anti-science, anti-truth legions collecting in our public square, does the mental acumen of the polis.

So what is one to do?

One of the hallmarks of my belief in activist social theories is that they be applicable, and lead to quantifiable, positive social change. We must move beyond simply expressing opposition to current political and social energies, to devising specific manners of combatting them. We must develop, as Hannah Arendt called them, "clumsy theories" – theories which can actually be *implemented.*

Ruskin's ideas show a way forward in the realm of the 21st-century global economy. And although I believe he would support a universal basic income, universal health care and access to housing for all, he states no such thing, and certainly is no proponent of communism or socialism.

I feel it is his acceptance of capitalism as the economic structure which makes his ideas more powerful. He is not going against what most people in our society (and certainly the older monied class, though not always today's youth) accept as the "best" way for the economy to work. Rather, he is tweaking, infiltrating and massaging it to make it work for a far greater portion of the population. And in the best of cases, for the entire society.

Ruskin reconsidered the manner in which we think about the most basic aspects of a healthy society. For instance, he noted: "The vital question, for individual and for nation, is, never 'how much do they make?' but 'to what purpose do they spend?'" Today, 21st-century "educated consumers" – all of those purchasing organic and fair-trade goods, buying local and at farmer's markets, examining labels to make certain they weren't made in far-away sweatshops, staying away from Walmart, Target and other multi-national corporations while paying a

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little bit extra to support the locally owned store or individual market – are living by Ruskin's code.

Doing so does cost a little bit more, and given that reality and many workers' low pay, we also need to think in terms of another movement gathering steam, one that Ruskin would heartily endorse: the Fight for $15. For Ruskin made it very clear that the price of labor should *not* be set by the anarchy of the marketplace and desperation of the worker. A fair and living wage should be paid to all, he argued:

> The abstract idea, then, of just or due wages, as respects the laborer, is that they will consist in a sum of money which will at any time procure for him at least as much labor as he has given, rather more than less. And this equity or justice of payment is, observe, wholly independent of any reference to the number of men who are willing to do the work.

This idea of "procuring at least as much labor as he has given" translates into an equitable exchange in which workers are paid what they're truly worth, not what business owners say they are. We definitely see this idea in force now, as over the past couple of years, the ideal of a $15/hour minimum wage has been gathering steam. Low-wage earners in many cities and states can now take home pay more in line with their time expenditure, and thus have greater purchasing power.

Finally, we need to follow Ruskin's lead and center honesty in our economic thinking. Currently, the idea of "honesty" in commerce runs contrary to our economic model. Our economy is built on lying to consumers, usually obliquely through advertising messaging, but sometimes through overbilling, frank misstating of a product's benefits, and outright fraud, such as Wells Fargo Bank's practice of opening expensive bank accounts without informing people of their fees. But it doesn't have to be that way; as Ruskin said:

> The acquisition of [true] wealth is finally possible only under certain moral conditions of society, of which quite the first was a belief in the existence and even, for practical purposes, in the attainability of honesty...There is no Wealth but Life. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others.

Ruskin's ideas are hardly revolutionary. He does not advocate for the cessation of wealth accrual, or the destruction of the capitalist system. He only advocates for ramming a moral lodestar into the center of the system. There would still be labor and capital – but capital would treat labor with humanity, kindness, fairness and honesty. Money could still be won, but it would no longer be the "god" it has risen to in our pagan economic system; it would be simply a byproduct of hard work and good ideas, not malfeasance, cleverness and trickery. And when gobs of money *were* won, the "winner" would treat all the laborers in their orbit with fairness and honesty, as well as do their best to protect the values of respect, health and morality.

Unto this Last thus holds much wisdom for today's progressive economic and social thinker. The kind of tweaks, infiltrations, and moral compass Ruskin proposes – if advocated by enough people through specific legislative, legal and economic proposals – might actually begin to create the kind of practical utopia he envisioned. Many such ideas – a universal basic income, access to higher education for all, health care as a human right, etc. – are already percolating in our society. In some cases, like a living wage, social pressure has driven legislative action and these ideas are actually beginning to be implemented through legislation.

Now we just need more of that!

Filed under Business
Tagged as capitalism, economic theory, economy, morality, Ruskin

2 Comments

BY GUEST AUTHORS | OCTOBER 11, 2014 · 5:18 PM

Machiavelli in America and One Response to this Social Illness

Tom Block is an author, playwright and artist, whose work spans more than two decades. In this blog post, Tom introduces us to his political antidote to our Machiavellian political sphere. Adapted from his book, Machiavelli in America, this piece is part of Tom's greater exploration of how to bring spiritual and even mystical values to bear on contemporary society. His work

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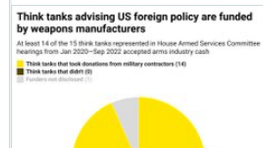

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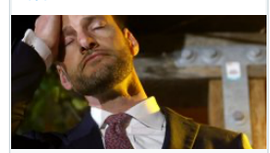

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All I would ask is that people wait until rail workers have seen details of the deal before praising the administration.

A PR cycle saying "it's over, workers won!" Is not helpful if rail workers can't live with the actual agreement, reject it, and want to strike.

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is collected under a theory he calls "Prophetic Activism," a model of using art, thought and other means to infiltrate (rather than simply oppose) the power centers of business and politics. For more information about Tom's work, please visit his website.

Tom Block and his most recent book, Machiavelli in America

Tom Block and his most recent book, *Machiavelli in America*

> Nowadays, the Machiavellian notion that political arrangements may not be judged by any objective standards of right and wrong, that there is neither any natural or any divine law, but only the law of will, of success and failure, is almost unchallenged (p. xvi).

Many people are familiar with the controversial thinking of the Renaissance political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli (d. 1527). His influence has been so widespread that the word "Machiavellian" has been incorporated into our language as a pejorative, defining a person who is cunning, duplicitous and operates in bad faith.

What might be less well known is the profound influence that Machiavelli has on contemporary American politics. From state houses to the Presidency, Machiavelli's ideas and motivations are central to building winning political campaigns and passing legislation, however un-democratic and antithetical to a healthy, pluralistic society. As Renaissance scholar Paul Grendler noted (p.149): "Today, Machiavelli's influence on political policy may be greater than at any time since he served the Florentine government. Machiavelli has become American."

The foundation of Machiavelli's political ideology is straightforward: everyone in society is selfish, acting primarily for personal gain. And for a politician to succeed in mastering this world, she has to either manipulate or frighten people into believing that their interests ally most closely with her own.

Machiavelli's program concentrates on subjugation and mastery. He does not concern himself with the common good, democracy or human rights. For Machiavelli, the concepts of moral philosophers from Moses to the Sufis and the religions within which they operate are certainly important. But only because these religious systems provide a fraudulent tool for the relentless, morally unhinged pursuit of power. In terms of their direct relation to political reality, however, he considers them as meaningless as music.

Machiavelli's central tenet is that the truth of any matter must be overwhelmed by two stronger factors: fear and fraud. In terms of inspiring fear in the populace, it is the surest method of gaining control over them:

> I come to the conclusion that, men loving according to their own will and fearing according to that of the prince, a wise prince should establish himself on that which is in his own control and not in that of others (p. 82).

He also noted that truth can be easily shunted aside, using fraudulent means to inspire fear, and then oneself offered as the palliative, inspiring a populace to follow the leader:

> The great majority of humans is satisfied with appearances, as though they were realities, and is often more influenced by the things that seem than by those that are (p. 182).

It is through inspiring fear in the citizenry, as well as using fraud as a tool to appear to be what the people want (i.e., safe, religious, moral, "like" them etc.) that political victory can most easily be won.

In terms of winning political office or legislative battles by immoral means? Not to worry. He noted: "When the act accuses, the result excuses" (p. 139). Whatever actions undertaken to attain political victory are excused if the actor is successful. Machiavelli absolved triumphant leaders of all blame or responsibility for any act necessary to attain and retain power:

> A wise mind will never censure anyone for having employed any extraordinary means for the purpose of establishing a kingdom or constituting a republic . . . when the result is good, it will always absolve him from blame (p. 139).

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Machiavellian inspiration is not hard to discern, either throughout American history or even in our most recent political season. A brief study of George W. Bush's (43rd President of the United States) manner of attaining a very dubious electoral victory, and then his perverse political use of the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001 (on New York's World Trade Center and other sites) would suffice. But for our purposes, it is important to mention that George W. Bush was acting in a time-honored American Machiavellian tradition.

Neo-Conservative thinker Michael Ledeen (b. 1941) noted the similarities between the beginnings of America and the Florentine's ideals: "There is much in Machiavelli that sounds like the American Founding Fathers...Machiavelli's notion of the good state calls to mind *The Federalist Papers*" (p. 109).

Ledeen continued on to reference specific Machiavellian influence on James Madison (fourth President of the United States), Alexander Hamilton (first United States Secretary of the Treasury) and Benjamin Franklin (Founding Father and so-called "First American"). The Florentine's inspiration can also be found on the thinking of George Washington (first President of the United States); Thomas Jefferson, (principal author of the Declaration of Independence) and John Adams (America's first Vice President, as well as the second President of the United States). All of this has been outlined in more depth in my book.

The reverberations of the long-ago Florentine political philosopher can clearly be ascertained in the most recent electoral campaigns, which often are based in fear, character assassination and moral fraud.

For instance, in this current electoral cycle in North Carolina, Republican challenger Thom Tillis is ratcheting up the fear by linking Senator Kay Hagan (D) to terrorist threats. A campaign advertisement of his notes: "Hagan and [President] Obama are to blame for the growing emergency linked to extremist groups like ISIS." And in keeping with the Machiavellian dictate that another sure way to win a political campaign is to assassinate the opposition, Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) has undertaken a scorched-earth campaign against his challenger, Alison Grimes (D):

> As many observers predicted, the McConnell strategy was to bring Grimes' popularity down. She has been bombarded by negative attacks over the summer by McConnell's campaign and super PACs.

The reality of American politics turns away from the moral intentions of our Declaration of Independence and Constitution and toward a power-driven oligarchy, ruled over by the most pernicious, negative and fraudulent.

It should be noted that this problem infects one side of the aisle far more than the other. Although the mainstream press would be loathe to appear anything but "objective" (defined as the midpoint between the two parties), it is the Republican Party, and even more so the right-wing "Tea Party" members of that party, who most clearly exhibit the influence of the medieval political philosopher. Renaissance scholar Paul Grendler noted that this linkage between America's right wing and the Renaissance philosopher goes back to at least World War II:

> Machiavelli has been a theme in American conservative political discussion since the 1940s. It is likely that the use of Machiavelli has contributed to the combative mentality that characterized American Cold War politics, the belligerency of American conservatism and the take-no-prisoners tactics and language employed against liberalism and the Democrats (p. 168).

In my book, I outline many specific manners in which Machiavelli not only influenced our Founding Fathers, but also can still be felt in the legislative, executive and even judicial branches of government, including the overwhelming power of money, the efficacy of character assassinations and the use of war-like language to the utilization of religious and moral fraud and war itself, all as immoral political tools.

Regardless of what we might wish, think or work for, it is the Machiavellian dictates of power politics which are accepted as "politics as usual," while all other potential moral methods of political interaction are simply shunted to the side as the strategy of losers. And time and again, the results of political elections confirm the view that Machiavelli *is* for winners.

Although this dynamic is well known and even remarked upon, we (as a society) haven't developed effective responses to Machiavelli, specific manners of combatting this pernicious dynamic. What I offer in my book, and will summarize here, is one manner of attempting to combat this social cancer. And one which takes into account our *zeitgeist*, from the deeply religious nature of so much of America's public life, to the unwillingness of American journalists to base their reporting on the truth, opting instead for some mushy middle between the positions of the two major parties, which they define as "objective." This lack of moral clarity in the press corps only allows fraudulent political actors more leeway in creating their own alternate reality, a vile combination of fraud, character assassination and amoral pandering.

Though at least one administrator of this blog might disagree with me, I feel strongly that God and religion must be taken into account when considering a palliative to the shared social illness exhibited in our public square. Activist responses to social illnesses must take into account the reality of that society; and offer familiar (i.e., religiously-based for Americans) manners of infiltrating and changing it – instead of simply standing outside of the metaphorical walls to the city and lobbing well-meaning and ineffectual ideas toward a population that couldn't care less.

***A Response to Machiavelli:* The Moral Ombudsman**

Conservative columnist Cal Thomas put forward an interesting proposal concerning the insertion of truth into politics:

> Before an election, have candidates take a lie detector test. Put it on TV and/or the Internet. A panel of reporters or other experts could ask the questions, just like they do in presidential debates. In fact, this could be a five-minute segment at the end of the debates. "And now, to the lie detectors..."

Ha, ha, ha! The political participants on both sides of the aisle would never accept common sense remedies such as this one. It would too easily and clearly unmask the whole pernicious system. Lie detector tests are for criminals! Not for politicians, they would assure.

And we certainly can't rely on the press to offer us a reportage of current politics and events based on truth (instead of some bizarre combination of "objectivity," generally held opinion and polling data – which itself only represents the desires of the most powerful propagandistic machine).

The unwillingness to base journalism in truth is well-noted, by the way. As the *Los Angeles Times* noted in an editorial: "the canons of the profession [journalism] prevent most journalists from saying outright: These charges are false." And as *Washington Post* journalist Melinda Henneberger said, concerning her profession's (lack of) attachment to truth in reporting: "Newspapers hardly ever haul off and say a public figure lied, and I like that about us."

So it falls to us, we the people, to devise our own method of inserting truth into the Machiavellian world of American politics, and what follows is one such proposal. I have devised an idea that can be implemented within our political system, offering a muscular response to the ingathering of power and money by the top one percent of American citizens. As Machiavelli noted (p.211): "So enormous is the ambition of the *grandi* that it soon brings that city to ruin if it is not beaten down by various ways and various modes."

This response to Machiavelli offers one manner to "beat them down."

Honest discourse and unimpeded knowledge is virtually impossible to come by in the American political panorama. For this reason, I propose that clearly stated information itself represents the greatest potential tool supporting genuine democracy. In a country where voter suppression, lying, cheating, stealing and all manner of fraud are accepted as "politics as usual," the ability to come by clear and concise information on any issue is virtually impossible.

The Moral Ombudsman would operate within the parameters of 21st-century Washington D.C., acknowledging the manner in which power is won and imposed. Specifically, this is the call for the creation of a non-profit organization of the same name: "The Moral Ombudsman," to develop and insert a moral lodestar into politics.

The Moral Ombudsman would bring together a board of recognized religious and social leaders to form a non-governmental organization to provide *moral* oversight of our lawmakers, as well as the laws that they make. This collective would be constituted of leaders from the following religious and spiritual groups, representing the breadth of faith and secular communities in the United States: Christianity (two each from Baptist, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Presbyterians, Methodist, Anglican, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox); Judaism (one each from Reformed, Conservative and Orthodox); Muslim (one each from Sunni, Shi'a and Sufi); Buddhism, Sikhism, Hindu, Mormon; Unitarian, Secular Humanist and Atheist.

Other potential board members might include an academic leader, an agreed upon politician (preferably at the end of his public career, and not at the beginning), a social theorist or perhaps lay leader who would add perspective to the conversation. The final constitution of the board would represent the vast majority of American citizens. It would also acknowledge the Christian heritage of our nation by weighting the board in that direction.

The board would first be charged with developing a social and political moral code that would be agreed upon by *all* members of the board. Although at first blush, this step clearly seems to present a potentially insurmountable obstacle, it is not as difficult as it might appear. At the core, virtually all religions are in accord. There are moral values shared by all creeds, which inform the hearts of every sacred path.

In this response to Machiavelli, the common good will take into account such things as the *obligation* of those who have the means to aid those who do not; the right to adequate health care access to for every citizen (hardly revolutionary, as thirty-two of the thirty-three developed nations have universal health care, with the United States being the lone exception); adequate shelter, a necessary amount of nutritious food, free education, freedom of religion and association and freedom from racist or ethnically deleterious laws and treatment.

Social issues such as the following would be discussed and agreed upon, becoming the bedrock formulation for the Moral Ombudsman. These positions would help define the manner in which politicians, their actions and their laws, would be viewed:

- Obligation of the rich to help the poor
- Human right to health care
- Human right to adequate, nutritious food
- Human right to satisfactory housing
- Forgiveness, restitution and rehabilitation as bases for the prison system
- Minority rights
- Women's rights
- Freedom of association
- Freedom of worship
- Freedom from racism
- Freedom from hate speech
- Foreign policy based in respect and commonality
- Truth as the basis for news reporting
- Truth as the basis for political language and ideas
- Truth as the basis for political campaigns

Each religion's scriptures provides many different readings, from the suppression and slaughter of the "other;" veiling of women; polygamous and tribal laws to readings that emphasize peace, respect and open-mindedness. Put bluntly, George W. Bush could find plenty in the Scriptures to justify his views, as could Martin Luther King Jr.

Leaders from the various religious creeds would be sought who believed in the opening and loving aspects of their creeds, not the close-minded, *"us" vs. "them"* manner of politicizing religion. They would conceive of theirs as *a* valid path, and not *the* single road to spiritual grace. They would be leaders whose views shared much with the contemporary *zeitgeist* in respecting the plurality of ethnic, social and cultural diversity and the worth of individuals (instead of holding that the religious system is more important than the rights of its constituent members).

The Moral Ombudsman would reach beyond social, economic and political barriers, speaking in the best interests of *all* Americans, all the time. The Moral Ombudsman would be immune to fluctuations in the stock market, monetary reward, poll numbers or television ratings.

Issuing its decisions in policy papers, op-ed articles, newsletters, scorecards on the votes of members of congress, governors and the president and other like manners, this non-profit watchdog group would finally offer a true moral center from which to judge the legislation and actions of our elected princes.

Once the moral structure was set into place with the creation of a specific set of political virtues, the work of the organization would be to judge both legislators and legislation by its precepts. Each law coming up for a vote in Congress would be compared to the moral principles agreed upon by the Board. A grade would be issued, with a zero representing a completely immoral law (such as raising taxes on the poor so that the rich might have a lower tax burden), to a 100% (universal health care, for instance). There would be a written release issued, as well as a rating.

Each legislator would have his votes analyzed, and would receive a sum-total number score for his moral centeredness. This method is modeled on the scores issued by NGO groups from the National Rifle Association to the Nature Conservancy.

Additionally, the Executive Branch, military, State Department and actions of members from other governmental arms would be so judged. Pilotless Drone attacks on other people's soil? Nope. No matter how much verbiage there is about terrorism, eliciting the fear response of the population, this cannot be morally justified. Secret Ops work in Latin America? Presidential pandering, military posturing, and State Department dithering? No, no and no. The Moral Ombudsman's job would not be to garner votes or make friends with the higher ups. It's job would be to begin the vital but nearly impossible work of centering American politics in a moral schema, instead of allowing it to continue to founder in the media created world of "objective reality."

In the end, difficult though it might be, a moral middle would be carved out of the amorphous and amoral public and political square. Finally, some manner of shared values would emerge that each of us, in our heart of hearts, might agree upon.

Is this solution easy? Absolutely not. Is it fraught with potential problems?

Yes. Oh, yes.

But we are left with no choice but to try.

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