

Analysis of the Collapse of America Must Go Deeper than Just Blaming Capitalism

Many, if not most liberal commentators are sharply critical of capitalism these days, for obvious reasons. But one must be a bit nuanced in this critique. It is very easy, but very simplistic, to point to capitalism *per se* as the single or even primary cause of the downfall of America we are beginning to live through. While the specific form of *laissez-faire* capitalism perhaps deserves the lion's share of the blame for the current crisis, for the purposes of a deeper analysis of the social breakdowns we are now seeing, singling out capitalism as the culprit is counterproductive because it is a partial analysis. This is due in part to two reasons. First, social analyses in a complex and multilayered society such as ours cannot remain economic or even materialistic and claim to be complete. This is in part where the dogmatic materialist interpretation of Karl Marx has failed.¹

Economic structures, important as they are, are simply not the only engines of society, nor do they stand alone as definitive of a culture or its evolution. Values, norms, language, cognitive structures, social interaction, theoretical and existential assumptions, etc. all form part of the matrix by which a society evolves in various directions. Second, following from this recognition, it must be admitted that limiting criticism to capitalism is incomplete because the philosophical interest in a deeper social analysis requires an examination not only of the empirical structures of society, but the cognitive structures and the moral-social norms that stand behind behavior and give rise to it. In some cases (e.g. greed and individualism, as noted in the posting last week), these norms have been critically examined as optional norms for persons or society, and found to have been conceptually inadequate to the moral goal of human well-being if put into practice. Thus, a society predicated on such (what the Founders thought to be) *a priori* notions was bound to fail. This is just one way in which cognitive discourse can transcend and even be engaged prior to the historical instantiation of certain norms and structures. As such, this aspect of philosophical examination becomes a point of departure not simply for understanding a society's evolution, but for critiquing that society.

This is the normative and systematic aspect of social analysis. Such a level of exploration has a decidedly cognitive base in that the norms held are maintained first with the expectation, if not the explicit claim, that they are good, obligatory or forbidden "for all." Second, there is an implied claim that norms, if challenged, can be defended. We all engage in this level of abstract, normative discussion whenever we put forward a claim that someone disputes. Even when we discuss human rights or civil rights, we are in the domain of discourse that cannot be reduced to the empirical or historical level. The empirical-historical aspect of analysis is an examination of the patterns, processes, and lived philosophies in history, to see in which direction they are arcing. While this form of thought certainly is legitimate and has its place, it is incomplete, since we do not live exclusively at this level. Thus, the concern here (and in my last posting) is with a more

¹ Marx would not agree with the dogmatic Marxists of today who hold to a strictly materialistic approach to analyzing social evolution. Marx—especially the early Marx—maintained that *relations* of production, not just the labor power of production, were the basis of historical materialism. These relations of production clearly involved a moral dimension of social analysis, and thus required more than a simple materialistic bias.

systematic, universal approach to thinking through the philosophy that underpins laissez-faire capitalism and other aspects of our culture today that is cause of our crumbling. It will be seen that those dynamics have been discussed and found to be conceptually lacking. The subsequent empirical analysis of where we now stand in history is a concrete demonstration of the insufficiency of the principles that underlie the behavior patterns that philosophers for generations have largely deemed to be conceptually vacuous and thus would be disastrous for society. The latter situation is where we currently stand, so the point here is to examine those conceptual norms which were largely deliberately discarded (especially by our Founders), but which, having crept back into American society, are now every bit as causative of our collapse as the capitalistic philosophy that is predicated upon these norms.

The way the Founders understood this deeper level of conceptual analysis was in terms of rationalism, which they believed to be innate to humans. In particular here, I have in mind what the Founders had to say about rational norms and moral philosophy, and how to put them both into play in a form of government. It is these norms and the discussion of them between the Founders themselves that give us insight into what concepts they thought would work and what would fail as they crafted what they considered would be a superior form of democracy. The issues were not simply class, survival, and/or production and ownership, although these issues were clearly part of the overall philosophy they thought would work existentially. Rather, there was a conceptual approach to living democratically to which the Founders in their deliberations were obliged to pay careful attention, and they did. It is this conceptual approach that has been surrendered today and replaced with individual desire-satisfaction, general appeals to relativism/irrationalism, and/or a strictly empirical method. These are the dimensions of our individual and collective lives that in part underpin the capitalistic and social collapse we are currently seeing and living in its nascent stages. It is these aspects of social philosophy that were seen ages ago to be conceptually inadequate to the understanding of democracy and the good life, and thus were rejected as norms upon which to live.

In sum, to put it all too simplistically: social critique can never be exclusively empirical or historical. There is always a dimension of social analysis which is strictly conceptual. These concepts may be shown to be inadequate to a conception of the best interests of society, and thus are not put into play concretely. Approaching the Founders with this understanding will enable us to recognize that there is a distinct rationalism in the way the Founders understood which normative ideas were best in allowing the full flowering of human potential. It is on the basis of this rationalism that they crafted their fundamental insights. We need not be rationalists like the Founders were, but neither may we dismiss the distinctly abstract nature of some of our discourse about the norms of social evolution and evaluation. Thus, no analysis of the crisis today cannot remain at the level of the empirical, but must take into account the systematic dimensions of the crisis as well.

So what of the normative conceptual analyses of the Founders? Where do we see it, and what rational perspectives did they take which led them one way and not another? We will begin such an examination in earnest with the next posting.