

The Spirit of the Founding Fathers

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WILL A RECREATION of the spirit of the Founding Fathers be of help to us in the twentieth century? Note that the question is not, would the spirit of the Founding Fathers be better than the mindless hedonism and vulgarized envy of modern democracy? Of that, there is no doubt. But, whether the spirit of the Founding Fathers will be helpful to us is subject to grave doubts.

It will be argued here that this is so because the Founding Fathers of our nation as well as the Founding Father of economics, are grounded in the "new science of politics" which in turn is based upon a view of self-love inadequately based on the truth of reality. The only social science which would be adequate to our times, or for that matter any other times, is one grounded in a proper theory of self-love rather than self-interest. Love is not a sentimental surrender to emotion and feeling, but a steady and cool promotion of the true good of the object of one's love, whether oneself or others. It is true that the Founding Fathers and Adam Smith, in contrast to the relativism of modern social science, did believe that what they said was consistent with the nature of reality. The central question then becomes the nature of reality and the relation of man's experience to that reality. If one's understanding of experience and of men is grim, mean, low, and ungrateful, then the good for man, man's happiness, is going to be found in warding off evils, and pursuing comfort. But a person's under-

standing of experience seems to have precious little to do with the content of that experience. To the best of this author's knowledge, there are no plausible environmental hypotheses to explain how a man feels about the world.

Taking an ungrateful view of the world to its extreme leads to the gnostic attempts to subvert reality with Satan and Prometheus as their comrades in arms. Less virulent forms lead to the typical right wing and/or economic ideologies: absolutization of private property, emphasis on the will *i.e.* sanctity of individual freedom, utility functions, and calculi of consent. Or as an economist might put it: You pays your money and you takes your choice.

It is very tempting for economists to remain on the side of the cynical and selfish. Economists, particularly in their day to day work of trying to understand people and what is going on in the market place, find it convenient and fruitful to take the low road. But the more fundamental question still remains of whether men are made happier by acting on such assumptions? Economists often find it difficult to conceive of any alternative because they are usually offered only one alternative: the altruism of a Comte. Not only is this unrealistic but it leads to a degrading and even more seductive collective worship. But is this the only alternative?

In Federalist 29 Publius claims that "In reading many of the publications against the Constitution, a man is apt to imagine that he is

perusing some ill-written tale or romance, which, instead of natural and agreeable images, exhibits to the mind nothing but frightful and distorted shapes—'Gorgons, hydras, and chimeras dire'; discolored and disfiguring whatever it represents, and transforming every thing it touches into a monster."¹

No reference is given for the quote about gorgons, hydras, and chimeras dire. The most likely reference is Plato's *Phaedrus* (229d-3e). Here Plato is discussing the story of Boreas and Orithyria and points out that both the allegorization of fables and their rationalistic debunking by scientific methods of criticism are a waste of time. The former means you will have to rehabilitate "Hippocentaurs and chimeras dire, Gorgons and winged steeds flow in apace"; the latter, scientific debunking, is a sort of "crude philosophy which takes up a great deal of time." Socrates declares that he has no leisure for such inquiries and proceeds to tell us why. "I must first know myself, as the Delphian inscription says; to be curious about that which is not my concern, while I am still in ignorance of my own self, would be ridiculous. And therefore I bid farewell to all this; the common opinion is enough for me. For, as I was saying, I want to know not about this, but about myself: am I a monster more complicated and swollen with passion than Typho, or a creature of a gentler and simpler sort, possessing, by divine grace, a nature devoid of pride."

If one may go back a little earlier one must not forget that Hesiod's *Theogony* (XII, 820 ff) discusses the smashing of Typhoeus and that "From Typhoeus are descended the winds whose breath drives the rain, except Notus and Boreas, and Zephyr who brings fair weather; these winds are descended from the gods and to men they are a great blessing." Being from Louisiana one has respect for the typhoon monster and its power to destroy, simply as an element of nature. We call them hurricanes. Being a member of the human race one knows the power of human pride, swollen with passion.

But here one touches upon the very essence of the so-called social sciences. What kind of creatures are we? What is our nature? Do we have the opportunity of changing that swollen

pride-ridden monster so that he becomes a "creature of a gentler and simpler sort, possessing, by divine grace, a nature devoid of pride." It is around such elemental questions that the various versions of the founding seem to run. Is it too much to say that the whole split between federalists and anti-federalists, ratifiers, and anti-ratifiers, classical liberals vs. conservatives, revolves around the answers to such a question? Let us try to unravel the confusion.

But why should an economist concern himself with such matters? Modern economists pride themselves on their value-free, analytic rigorism, which in effect de-natures man. For all practical purposes most modern economists would assert that man has no nature which is why we can treat him scientifically. Man is a bundle of wants and desires. He is a utility function. We cannot say anything about the objects of those wants or desires nor can we say anything about happiness. The classical economists and the founding fathers were not paralyzed by the fact-value distinction. On this matter it is ironic that economists are often accused of assuming man to be selfish and a beast, when in the modern world it is more to the truth that economists have assumed man to be near angelic. Man's wants and desires are assumed to be good and worthy to be satisfied. Pride, envy, snobbery, malice and lust have not been part of the modern economist's tool kit. When you draw an indifference curve most often it is clothing and food or X and Y rather than pornographic aids and punk rock.

Now let us return to the world of Adam Smith and the Federalist Papers. The man to whom we are indebted for establishing the linkage between Adam Smith and the Federalist is, of course, the late Martin Diamond. On the basis of my understanding of Diamond let me try to relate what I think is at stake here. First of all Diamond, as well as Kendall and Kendall-Carey, has destroyed the modern egalitarian liberals understanding of the founding, *i.e.* that the Declaration was "democratic" and the Constitution was "reactionary." He does this by stressing democracy as a political form of government, rule by the people, rather than democracy as a substantive end of equality. Or

put otherwise, for Diamond, liberty is the end and democracy is the means. Second democracy is a dangerous means which has never worked very well in the past, and therefore, having paid our due respect to the past, we must be prepared to be original and novel and experimental. Third, the experimental means, aside from a few gadgets is owed to Adam Smith: an extended republic based on a widespread division of labor, economic progress leading to a commercial society, and a widespread difference of interests both in degree and kinds of property which defuses the majority faction *i.e.* the poor so that they will not expropriate the rich. The new science of politics is essentially based on economics. Fourth, this development in turn is based on the triumph of modernity: the choice of practicable liberty rather than utopian virtue as the end of government. Let me quote Diamond's formulation: "What was truly revolutionary in the American Revolution and its Declaration of Independence was that liberty, civil liberty—the doctrine of certain unalienable rights—was made the end of government. Not as had been the case for millennia, whatever end power haphazardly imposed upon government; nor any longer the familiar variety of ends—not virtue, not piety, not privilege or wealth, not merely protection, and not empire and dominion; but now deliberately the principle of liberty."²

Here, if this is correct, is the green light for the economist. Character formation is replaced by institution building, as Diamond citing Strauss reminds the reader. Pride and vanity are to be channeled and not humbled. The dynamic energy of Typho is to be controlled to crank out the material goods. As Mandeville so clearly put it: "So vice is beneficial found when its by justice, lopt and bound." Vice is not to be eliminated but is to be used for utilitarian consequences.

Is this the correct interpretation of the founding? A good strong case can certainly be made for it. Put in a very strong and perhaps perverse way, it can be argued that what economics and the political philosophy of the Founding Fathers are ultimately based on is the universalization of tyranny. If this sounds perversely paradoxical let me note the meaning of tyranny

according to Publius. In Federalist 47 Publius claims: "The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny." Now, let me point out that Kendall-Carey in their attempt to preserve justice from the envious maw of the egalitarians and modern liberals point out in their conclusion that if we "let *them* have their head, . . . we shall speedily have the 'tyranny' that *The Federalist* teaches us how to avoid."³ Since Kendall-Carey entitled their article "How to Read" and told us that we had an obligation to "linger over every paragraph" it is not out of line to stress the fact that their version of federalist tyranny is in quotes. For the very good reason that it does not mean the same thing for the new science of politics as it did for the old science of politics.

For the ancients Publius' definition of tyranny fatally blurs the distinction between kingship and tyranny as the good and corrupt versions of one man rule. It is precisely the definition of tyranny in terms of the mere accumulation of power that gives the rhetorical steam to the man versus the state dichotomy. Aristotle and the ancients would not have defined tyranny in terms of the existence of power but in terms of the objects to which that power is directed and ultimately the condition of the soul. In the *Politics*, Book V, Chap. 10, 1311a, he defines a tyrant, "as has often been repeated, has no regard to any public interest, except as conducive to his private ends; his aim is pleasure . . . Wherefore also in their desires they differ, the tyrant is desirous of riches, the king, of what bring honour. And the guards of a king are citizens, but of a tyrant mercenaries." In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle reminds us also that "it is only in the Spartan state that the legislators have made provision for education and the guidance of life. In most countries these matters are neglected and everyone lives as he likes, ruling his own wife and children like the Cyclops."

When considering the choice of pseudonyms the choice of Publius is not only to be thought of with respect to Caesar but even more impor-

tantly Solon and Lycurgus. In the definition of Publius, Lycurgus would certainly be a tyrant but in the ancients understanding he was the ultimate anti-tyrant. The remark that a modern commentator has made about Solon captures the entire spirit of the Federalist Papers as well as Smithian political economy: "Solon, though he has been called the greatest economist of antiquity, did not really know much about Political Economy, for to his simple mind it seemed that the source of the trouble was not the System, but Greed and Injustice."⁴ The motor for the new science of politics is greed and avarice, precisely those characteristics which for the ancients described the soul of the tyrant. In Federalist 12 we find: "The prosperity of commerce is now perceived and acknowledged by all enlightened statesmen to be the most useful as well as the most productive source of national wealth, and has accordingly become a primary object of their political cares. By multiplying the means of gratification, by promoting the introduction and circulation of the precious metals, those darling objects of human avarice and enterprise, it serves to vivify and invigorate the channels of industry, and to make them flow with greater activity and copiousness."

In brief, man is a monster more complicated and swollen with passion than Typho. Even though he cannot be reformed he can be harnessed. The expected fruits of such harnessing are, we should never forget, liberty and charity. In Plutarch's treatment of Publius Valerius Poplicola and the comparison to Solon's life, he reminds us that "Poplicola's riches were not only justly his, but he spent them nobly in doing good to the distressed." The incredible productivity of a free economy and the alleviation of man's distress were certainly promised fruits of the new science of politics which have been delivered. To use a different analogy one can compare the Constitution to a gigantic windmill which is able to capture the winds of hurricane force and use that energy to grind the mills and produce bread for the people. One can make a very persuasive case that the modern liberals who would subvert the Constitution in the name of equality will end up killing the goose which lays the golden eggs. Liberty is

justified not only by itself but also because it delivers the goods through economic growth, and effectively tends to eliminate poverty defined in terms of any meaningful objective definition. It is presumably these indirect consequences of the Constitution to which Publius is referring in Federalist 1 when he refers to philanthropy and the public good. Let us also remember that the windmill, although thought of nostalgically today as belonging to the old order, was a symbol of energy and efficiency, in short, of modernity in that earlier commercial republic, Holland.

But can we live by bread alone? Will not too much bread and material goods corrupt the necessary minimum of virtues that a commercial society presupposes? We have had the bread. All the Founding Fathers—Madison, Jefferson, Adams, Washington included—believed that there was a necessary minimum of republican virtue required for a free and responsible society. Irving Kristol has properly identified that virtue as public spiritedness, pre-Claudian Roman, not very elevated, and essentially similar to what we would call the bourgeois ethic. This minimum includes the virtues that the classical economists praised and thought would be the fruits of a middle class society—thrift, hard work, spirit of independence, and self-respect. This is why they wished to destroy the vestiges of feudalism and hoped that material progress would be steady and never in huge jumps, because unexpected riches and wealth may corrupt, and produce sloth, and decay.

Now that we live in post-republican times, hopefully not Caligulan yet, what can we do? To what standards can we repair? If Diamond is correct, then there is not much hope from the Founding Fathers. There is a price or trade-off which we have paid and which must be paid if we are to maintain a regime of liberty. We can go back and soberly think with the same seriousness as the Founding Fathers did and no one since that time has done, but what the outcome of that process would be is left obscure by Diamond. There is the heartland thesis that the people out there are still virtuous, as they may have been presupposed by the Federalist writers; on this hypothesis all we have to do is

energize the sleeping giant, and awaken him to his strength. Alas one will also have to awaken him to his virtue. In moments of despair one gets the feeling that Kendall's missing chapter in the *Federalist*, which is to be filled by Richard Weaver, is much the same kind of enterprise as the missing link in evolutionary theory. Closely allied to this is the hope that the *other* American political tradition, the older anti-Federalist, possibly Southern, what Richard Weaver has described as Apollinian as opposed to the Northern Faustian view, can fill the breach. The argument here usually invokes the idea that the *Federalist* and its presuppositions are usually restricted to the Union as a whole and does not prescribe what is appropriate for the state and local governments. Irving Kristol has stated this as a premise of the American political tradition: "You can only achieve 'mild government' if you have a solid bedrock of local self-government, so that the responsibilities of national government are limited in scope. And a corollary of this premise is that such a bedrock of local self-government can only be achieved by a people who—through the shaping influence of religion, education, and their own daily experience—are capable of governing themselves in those small and petty matters which are the stuff of local politics."⁵

It appears to this writer that this is the view

of Kendall, Kristol, Berns, and others. That however open in theory American society may be, the local and state authorities, along with cooperating social institutions, will have to be the repositories of virtue and piety. I am frankly in intellectual agreement that in this country we have both the constitutional framework and the historical tradition to draw on and build upon when we need to. But I also take the view that all the institutions and traditions will not help if there is not substance. The substance comes only from exemplary models of human character and goodness such as Socrates and Christ. Roman Republicanism is not enough. We are called upon not only to be bright and clever, witty and well-read, but the infinitely more difficult task of aspiring to be authorities: exemplary models of goodness and virtue.

Now, the price one has to pay for this is a willingness to accept Socrates' alternative to the Federalists and the early political economists' view of human nature; namely that we might be "creatures of a gentler and simpler sort, possessing, by divine grace, a nature devoid of pride." We may have to forego our cynicism, our self-sufficiency, our hard certainties, our self-made men, and be willing to accept God's grace and what it entails. This is the task of all fathers, founding or not.*

*This article is drawn from a paper originally prepared for presentation to the Philadelphia Society, January, 1978, in Washington, D.C.

¹*The Federalist* (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), p. 180. Additional references are to this edition.

²Martin Diamond, "The Revolution of Sober Expectations," reprinted in *The American Revolution: Three Views* (New York: American Brands, Inc., 1975), p. 70.

³Willmoore Kendall and George Carey, "How to Read 'The Federalist'" in *Contra Mundum*, ed. Nellie D. Kendall (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1971), p. 417.

⁴H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1951), p. 100.

⁵Irving Kristol, "The American Revolution as a Successful Revolution," reprinted in *The American Revolution: Three Views* (New York: American Brands Inc., 1975), p. 44.