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Abstract

This article examines the role of values in the political discourse of the last decade in the US. It embarks from what many observers had described as a puzzle: the fact that significant parts of the American working class voted against their economic interests but in line with what they perceived to be their values. As a result, a president had been re-elected who cut taxes for the rich while waging an expensive war in Iraq and increasing public debt to historically unprecedented levels. It is argued that large sectors of the white American working class were disappointed with liberal politicians because they associated them with a cultural elite that occupied positions in society that allowed them to pursue careers of intrinsic value in the arts, science, or politics but which were largely closed to the working class. It is thus suggested that the 'culture wars' in the US are better interpreted as a struggle over access to the means to behave altruistically. The article rejects the widespread assumption that individuals are narrowly conceived economic self-interest maximizers. Rather, it suggests that human fulfilment can be related to the satisfaction derived from working for the common good.

Keywords

political culture, political discourse, social class, USA, values, voting

What follows might be considered a kind of experiment in the political relevance of social theory. It is an attempt to apply somewhat technical forms of value theory (cf. Graeber, 2001) to a very concrete, immediate political question: the strange appeal of right-wing populism to large sections of the American working class. Authors like Tom Frank, in *What's The Matter*

With Kansas, laid out the problem: in much of the US, insofar as the white working class is drawn to radical politics of any sort, it is far more likely to be the

far Right than the far Left. This question became unavoidable with 2004 re-election of George W Bush.

The structure of this article is simple. I begin by setting out the problem, and then propose a political-economic explanation. It is, I think, a pretty good one, and true as far as it goes. Still, I hope to show that the very logic of the explanation illuminates the limits of any purely political-economic approach and pushes towards something beyond it. The second half is an attempt to move beyond those limits by applying the results of value theory.

A political-economic hypothesis

In October 2004, American presidential candidates George W Bush and John Kerry held a series of debates. Polls held afterwards overwhelmingly found that most Americans felt Kerry had won the argument. Then a few weeks later, a majority of those same Americans voted for Bush anyway.

I think it was the debates more than anything else that left most of the American lib- eral intelligentsia reeling, because they took it as proof of what they had suspected: that all things they most hated about Bush were exactly what so many Americans liked about him. It was hard to escape the impression that, in the end, Kerry's articulate presentation, his skill with words and arguments, actually counted against him. It appeared to reflect something fundamental about Bush's popular appeal: that the very qualities they inter- preted as pig-headed stupidity – the stubborn determination to take simple policy posi- tions and then stick with them no matter how unwise, disastrous, or simply factually incorrect their basis may turn out to be –

real stakes. Ultimately, the battle is over the apparatus for the creation of persons, and the forms of value created in the process. Even beyond the question of whether universities and hospitals are to be forced to submit to the profit motive – that is, whether they themselves will be forced to abandon any notion that they represent autonomous domains of value – there is the question of whether they can maintain their role as the primary institutions regulating the self-creation of human beings at all, or whether they are ultimately to be replaced by churches, prisons and the military. The battle is lopsided on most fronts. Left populists stand little chance of radically changing the nature of US nationalism; Right populists stand little chance of having much say in determining what is art – though in neither case for lack of trying. The point is that the economic structures and strategies are not an autonomous domain here, but are part and parcel of the way each side protects its ability to control the legiti- mation of different forms of publicly recognized value.

All this does not, perhaps, provide a comprehensive explanation for the effectiveness of right-wing populism or the current directions of political debate in the US in the early 21st century. But if nothing else, it demonstrates that anthropological value theory can still provide important insights into the working of contemporary social systems, and the interest generated by some of these arguments in activist circles, in turn, suggests that critical social theory in general can still make itself relevant to the most important political debates.

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around hospitals and universities. This is not only true of long-standing univer- sity towns like Ann Arbor or New Haven but major cities like Baltimore, and even, to a surprising degree, global financial capitals like New York. (New York's largest employers are banks, but Columbia and NYU are numbers 3 and 5 respectively.) In other words, as commodity production increasingly moves overseas, we are seeing communities organized around what are, effectively, factories for the production of persons: divided, in good Cartesian fashion, into those which aim at improving mind, and those which aim at maintaining the body.

Both hospitals and universities were, once, institutions largely insulated from market logic. Now both are increasingly being forced to reorganize themselves on corporate lines. Both are sites of intense social struggle. For the Left, they have become the major new centres for labour organizing in recent decades. For the populist Right, they have been the special targets of rage and resentment. Right-wing populists see universities as the very locus for the production of the 'liberal elite', and tend to wage specific campaigns – most obviously, the campaign against the theory of evolution – to undermine the basis of their claims to authority. Radical anti-abortionists see the medical establish- ment, in turn, as the very locus of evil – an engine not of the creation of health but for the mass murder of babies. In a broader sense, what the Right is waging is a broad assault on the ability of the liberal elite – from which their constituents have been so effectively excluded – to control what in classic Marxist terms would be called the terms of social reproduction. To return to the 2004 elections again: conventional wisdom has it that Bush won re-election largely because the Republican Party was so effective in mobiliz- ing his base; it did so by ensuring that so many swing states had referendums on the ballot concerning a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage. The gay marriage issue is in fact a perfect illustration of the

seemed to be interpreted, instead, as moral strength or decisive leadership.

In one sense, one might say the liberal intelligentsia, by their confusion, was proving its opponents point: demonstrating just how out of touch with most Americans they really were. Still, there is a legitimate puzzle here. After all, Bush does hail from one of the most elite families in the country; he attended Andover, Yale and Harvard; he has been known to refer to the wealthiest class of Americans as his 'base'. How could such a man ever be taken as a 'man of the people'? Stories of dramatic class mobility through academic accomplishment are increasingly rare in the US. And I think this is precisely where to look for an explanation. For many of its citizens, America is beginning to look more and more like a caste society, and the higher education system, and related institu- tions, rather than seeming a plausible means of social mobility, appears as the very appa- ratus of exclusion. What I want to ultimately argue then is that it's the very liberal elites who find Bush so repellent who have to bear much of the blame for this. Bush-style populism is the final result of their own stacking of the deck in favour of their own chil- dren. Hence my political-economic hypothesis. Let me lay it out in very brief – and there- fore, necessarily crude and somewhat simplified – form.

Americans have always seen the United States as a land of opportunity. Neither can it be denied that from the perspective of an immigrant from Haiti or Bangladesh, it contin- ues to be one. But America has always been a country built on the promise of *unlimited* upward mobility. Here, the remarkable thing is how little the discourse has changed with the changing statistical reality. Free market enthusiasts (a category that includes basically all purveyors of mainstream social and economic discourse in the US) continue to insist that the US is, as one recently put it, 'the most upwardly mobile country in history' (Elder, 2007). However, class mobility in the US had peaked in the 1960s and declined ever since, leaving the US

with the lowest rate of intergenerational class mobility among indus- trialized democracies (see e.g. Beller and Hout, 2006; Blanden et al., 2005). This appears to be partly because the gap between rich and poor is so vast, in the US, that it is increasingly difficult to cross it; partly because of the increasing cost of higher education.

The working-class condition had been traditionally seen as a way station: something individuals or families pass through on the road to something better. This is actually a conception that goes back at least to the late Middle Ages (Graeber, 1997; Laslett, 1972), where working for others was considered essential to the status of youth, but the frontier allowed the US to manage to maintain this vision of their own society far longer than almost anywhere else. Abraham Lincoln for example would regularly respond to Southern arguments that Northern wage-slavery was little different from the more literal variety by arguing that wage labour, in the North, was in no sense a permanent condition. Factory work in particular was seen as the province of first-generation immigrants, whose children, at the very least, could be expected to pass on to something else – at the very least to acquire some land and become a homesteader on the frontier. What mat- ters here is not so much whether this was actually true, but that it seemed plausible to most Americans at the time.

Every time that road is broadly perceived to be clogged, profound unrest ensues. The closing of the frontier led to bitter labour struggles, and over the course of the 20th century, the steady and rapid expansion of the American university system could be seen as a kind of substitute. Particularly after the Second World War, huge resources were poured into expanding the higher education system, which grew very rapidly. The gov- ernment promoted all this quite intentionally as a means of social mobility. The Cold War social contract was not just a matter of offering a comfortable life to the working classes;

cials can make statements like this without being immediately put away as raving lunatics.

Ultimately life is about the production of people. I mean this not just in the physical sense implied by the term 'reproduction', especially if that's reduced to pregnancy and childbirth. I mean it more in the sense that human beings are constantly shaping and fashioning one another, training and socializing one another for new roles, educating and healing and befriending and rivalling and courting one another. This is as mentioned earlier what life is actually about and it can never, by definition, be reduced to any simple utilitarian calculus. What's more, in most human societies – and in any not dominated by market relations – the forms of labour entailed in all this are recognized to be the most important ones. The production of material necessities, or material wealth, is usually seen as at best a subordinate moment in the overall process of creating the right sort of human beings. Hence the most important value forms in most societies are those that emerge from that process of ongoing mutual creation. Certainly, this might involve all sorts of fetishism in their own right, as tokens of honour not only inspire, but come to seem the source of, honourable behaviour; tokens of piety become the source of religious devotion; tokens of wisdom become the source of learning, and so on. But it seems to me these forms of fetishism are relatively minor – at least, in comparison with the kind of grandiose, ultimate fetishism that capitalism promulgates, that places the world of objects as a whole above that of human beings (cf. Graeber, 2005b, 2006).

In the US, though, if one looks at the matter institutionally, one begins to notice something very interesting. America is by no means a deindustrialized society. None- theless, factory labour has increasingly been relegated to immigrants and pushed away from the centres of major cities. At the same time, as Denning (2005) pointed out, any number of such cities are in the process of being reorganized, economically, almost entirely

which they believe they are doing something genuinely noble. They join the Army because they want to be like you.

Struggles over the production of human beings and social relations

Let me end with some brief thoughts about the larger theoretical implications – particularly with regard to the distinction between the domains of value and values, 'the market' and other forms of life.

In political economy terms, this is often treated as the difference between the domain of production and consumption (seen as equivalent to that of domestic life). Obviously, this is only true if one thinks what is really significant in the world is the history of manu- factured objects, but it has become, over the last 200 years, our favoured way of looking at economic and, therefore, social systems. We are, in other words, in that strange feti- shized world Marx described where we continually forget that the point of life is actually the creation of certain sorts of people, and that the same system can equally well be seen as consisting of a sphere for the making of human beings, that are then in effect con- sumed again in the workplace. One can hardly underestimate how deep this fetishism runs. In Africa and Asia, for example, it's perfectly unexceptional to hear government officials remarking that HIV infection rates are a serious crisis in their country, because the fact that in certain regions half the population is dying of AIDS is going to have dev- astating effects on the economy. There was a time when 'the economy' was seen prima- rily as the system through which people acquire the means to stay alive. We have reached such a pass that in many parts of the world, at least, the best reason to object to people dying is that it might interfere with economic growth rates. The thing to ask, it seems to me, is what has it taken to put us in a place where public offi-

it was also a matter of offering at least a plausible chance that their children would not be working class.

From the point of view of the governing elites, however, there are some obvious prob- lems with this approach. First of all, a higher education system cannot be expanded for- ever. Second, there quickly comes a point where you end up with far more educated people than you can employ at anything remotely like the level to which they have been trained, and at which they expect to be operating. At a certain point one ends up with a significant portion of the population unable to find work even remotely in line with their qualifications, who have every reason to be angry about their situation, and who have access to the entire history of radical thought. During the 20th century, this was precisely the situation most likely to spark urban revolts and insurrections. Revolutionary heroes in the global South, from Chairman Mao to Fidel Castro, almost invariably turn out to be children of modest families who scrimped and saved to get their children a bourgeois education, only to discover that a bourgeois education does not, in itself, allow entry into the bourgeoisie. The campus unrest of the 1960s and 1970s began at exactly the point where the expansion of the university system hit a dead end.

What we see afterwards, it seems to me, is best considered as a kind of settlement. On the one hand, most campus radicals were reabsorbed into the university (in the late 1970s and early 1980s it often seemed all liberal disciplines were dominated by self-proclaimed radicals). On the other, what those radicals ended up actually doing was largely a work of class reproduction. As the cost of education skyrocketed, and financial aid and student loan programmes were cut back or eliminated, the prospect of social mobility through education gradually declined. The number of working-class kids in college, which had been steadily growing until the late 1960s or even 1970s, began to decline, and has been declining ever since. This is true even if we consider the matter in purely economic terms. It is all the

more true when one considers that class mobility was never primarily a matter of income. Consider, here, the phenomenon of unpaid (or effectively unpaid) internships. It has become a fact of life in the US that if one chooses a career for any reason other than the money – if one wishes to become part of the world of books, or charities, the art world, to be an idealist working for an NGO an activist, an investigative reporter – for the first year or two, you will not be paid. This effectively seals off any such career for the vast majority of poor kids who actually do make it through college. Such structures of exclusion had always existed of course, especially at the top, but in recent years fences have become fortresses.

I think it's impossible to understand the 'culture wars' outside this framework. The identities being celebrated in 'identity politics' correspond almost exclusively to those groups whose members still see the higher education system as a potential means of social advancement: African-Americans, various immigrant groups, Queers, Native-Americans. (One might even add women, since by now women are attending universities at far higher rates than men.) These are also the groups that most reliably vote Democratic. Dra- matically lacking in debates about identity politics are identities like, say, 'Baptist', or 'Redneck' – that is, those that encompass the bulk of the American working class, who are made to vanish rhetorically at the same time as their children are, in fact, largely excluded from college campuses and all the social and cultural worlds college opens up.

The reaction is, predictably, a tendency to see social class as largely a matter of edu- cation, and an indignant rejection of the very values from which one is effectively excluded. As Tom Frank has recently reminded us, the hard Right in the US is largely a working-class movement, full of explicit class resentment. Most working-class Bush fans don't have a lot good to say about corporate executives, but to the frustration of progressives everywhere, corporate executives never seem to be-

With this in mind, we can return again to the working-class Republican who cannot imagine his or her son or daughter becoming part of the 'liberal elite'. This is precisely what we are seeing here. Exclusion from access to higher forms of value – what might be called 'nobility'. If that air conditioner mechanic's son – or daughter – wishes to go beyond merely making a good living, to pursue something higher, more noble, for a career, what options doe they she really have? Likely just two. They can seek employment with their local church, which is hard to get. Or they can join the Army.

This is, of course, the secret of nobility. To be noble is to be generous, high-minded, altruistic, to pursue higher forms of value. But it is also to be able to do so because one does not really have to think too much about money. This is precisely what our soldiers are doing when they give free dental examinations to villagers: they are being paid (modestly, but adequately) to do good in the world. Seen in this light, it is also easier to see what really happened at universities in the wake of the 1960s – the 'settlement' I mentioned above. Campus radicals set out to create a new society that destroyed the distinction between egoism and altruism, value and values. It did not work out, but they were, effectively, offered a kind of compensation: the privilege to use the university system to create lives that did so, in their own little ways; the opportunity to be supported in one's material needs while pursuing virtue, truth and beauty; and above all, to pass that privilege on to their own children. One cannot blame them for accepting the offer. But neither can one blame the rest of the country for resenting them. Not because they reject the project: as I say, this is what America is all about.

As I always tell activists engaged in the peace movement and counter-recruitment campaigns: why do working-class kids join the Army anyway? Because like any teen- ager, they want to escape the world of tedious work and meaningless consumerism, to live a life of adventure and camaraderie in

art world, or charity, or political engagement as in, say, journalism, or activism – that is, whether we are talking about Love or Truth or Beauty – we are speaking of ways that one can dedicate oneself to something other than the pursuit of money (and compensatory consumerism). If one does not possess a certain degree of wealth to start out with, or at the very least the right kind of social networks and cultural capital, one is simply not allowed to break into this world. Ultimately, what one is being excluded from is nobility.

Critical social theorists have a tendency to overlook all this, I think, because their theoretical terms still tend to draw on the very cynical assumptions I have been trying to challenge. In looking at structures of exclusion, for example, perhaps the most popular theoretical terms have been those developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1979, 1984, 1990), and that speak of different social fields (such as the economic, the political, the academic field, the art world), and the way social actors deploy economic, social and cultural capital to move within and between them. I think Bourdieu's theories are very useful here. At the same time, they have their limits. By reducing everything to forms of capital, Bourdieu ends up arguing that all fields are organized, at least tacitly, in the same way as the eco- nomic field: each is an arena of struggle between a collection of maximizing individuals. The only thing that really sets the economic field apart according to Bourdieu is that there's no work of euphemization: in market behaviour, all the selfish motives and maxi- mizing strategies that are covered up in other fields become utterly explicit. But all fields are not fields of competition. Some areas are valued precisely because they are not. Neither can this simply be reduced to the fact that – as Bourdieu sometimes rather cyni- cally suggests – those best able to play such maximizing games are those who manage to convince themselves they are doing something else. To the contrary, what we are seeing here, above all else, is a battle over access to the right to behave altruistically.

come the principal tar- gets of their ire. Instead, their hatred is directed above all at the 'liberal elite' (with its various branches: the 'Hollywood elite', the 'journalistic elite', 'university elite', 'fancy lawyers', 'the medical establishment'). The sort of people who live in big coastal cities, watch PBS or listen to NPR, or even more, who might be appearing in or producing programming for PBS or NPR.

Why, then, do working-class Bush voters resent intellectuals as a class more than rich people? It seems to me the answer is obvious. They do because they can imagine a sce- nario in which one of their children might become rich, but cannot possibly imagine one in which their children, no matter how talented, would become a member of the liberal intelligentsia. If you think about it that's not an unreasonable assessment. The child of an air conditioner repairman from Nebraska might not have very much chance of becoming a millionaire, but it could happen. Certainly, it's much more likely than his ever becoming an international human rights lawyer, or drama critic for *The New York Times*. Such jobs go almost exclusively to children of privilege. Insofar as there are not quite enough children of privilege to go around – since elites almost never produce enough offspring to reproduce themselves demographically – the jobs are likely to go to the most remark- able children of immigrants. Executives with Bank of America, or Enron, when facing a similar demographic problem, are much more likely to recruit from poorer white folk like themselves. This is partly because of racism; partly, too, because corporations tend to encourage a broadly anti-intellectual climate themselves. It is well known at Yale, where I have worked, that executive recruiters tend to prefer to hire Yale's 'B' students, since they are more likely to be people 'they'll feel comfortable with'.

This opens up what's the most difficult and divisive aspect of this conflict: the racism, the homophobia, the fundamentalism. Obviously none of these things have been brought into being by current directions in educational policy; they have all

been around for a long time. The question is why at this particular moment so many people are using them as a basis for voting, even if it means voting against their own economic interests. Here I might ask a parallel question. Why does one not see a similar anti-intellectual politics among, say, African-Americans, or in immigrant communities? I can't myself think of a single elected black official who got into office by appealing to this sort of sentiment. To the contrary, around the same time as the Bush–Kerry debate, the US witnessed an out- pouring of debate, among the African-American cultural and political leadership, about what to do with the problem of 'black anti-intellectualism'. In fact, the phenomenon in question seems to come down to little more than the fact that black high school students often mock those who spend much of their time studying as 'trying to be white' – in other words, that like any other American teenager, they make fun of nerds. The very fact that in black America this is considered a crisis is telling in itself, considering the complete absence of any parallel debate about white anti-intellectualism. Certainly, it's hard to think of a single African-American, or Asian or Latino politician, who panders to anti- intellectualism in the manner of George W Bush – a patrician who, as noted earlier, appears to have built his claim to being a 'man of the people' largely by acting like the sort of person who, in high school, would have himself made fun of nerds.

It seems to me the only explanation is because these are populations who continue to see the higher education system as a plausible means of social advancement. After all, it was precisely around the time (in the 1970s and 1980s) that tuitions began to rise precipi- tously, government grants for higher education began to be replaced with student loans, as interest rates on those loans skyrocketed and were increasingly aggressively enforced, that many of those that had previously been excluded from the system entirely were – in however limited a fashion – welcomed (cf. Kamenetz, 2006). The GI Bill of Rights, after all,

at all. Liberalism, in its heyday, stood for precisely the ability to make this transition. After all what is the point of a welfare state if not to free people to think about more important things?

Proposition III: The real problem of the American Left is that while it does try in certain ways to efface the division between egoism and altruism, value and values, it largely does so for its own children. This has allowed the Right to paradoxically represent itself as the champions of the working class. All this might help explain why the Left in America finds it so difficult to rally mass popular support. Far from promoting new visions of effacing the difference between egoism and altruism, value and values, or providing a model for passing from one to the other, progressives cannot even seem to think their way past it. Hence the pointlessness about the debate about the importance of 'cultural' vs 'bread and butter' issues. After the 2004 presidential election, the big debate in progressive circles was the relative importance of economic issues vs what was called 'the culture wars'. Did the Democrats lose because they were not able to spell out any plausible economic alterna- tives, or did the Republicans win because they successfully mobilized conservative Christians around the issue of gay marriage? As I say, the very fact that progressives frame the question this way not only shows they are trapped in the Right's terms of analysis. It demonstrates they do not understand how America really works.

Let us return, in this light, to consider those unpaid internships – the ones which so effectively freeze working-class kids out of the best or most fulfilling jobs – and under- stand a little better what's really going on. Earlier, I said these policies lock the vast majority of Americans out from careers one would want for 'any reason other than the money'. We can perhaps rephrase this now. What we are really talking about are jobs that open the way to the (legitimate, professional) pursuit of any forms of value other than the economic. Whether it's the

about money – or more precisely, about whatever it is that money is measuring; also, whatever it is that economic actors are assumed to be pursuing. When we are working for a living, or buying and selling things, we are rewarded with money. But whenever we are not working or buying or selling, when we are moti- vated by pretty much anything other than the desire to get money, we suddenly find ourselves in the domain of 'values'. The most commonly invoked of these are of course 'family values', but we also talk about religious values, political values, the values that attach themselves to art or patriotism – one could even, perhaps, count loyalty to one's favourite basketball team. All are seen as commitments that are, or ought to be, uncor- rupted by the market. At the same time, they are also seen as utterly unique; where money makes all things comparable, 'values' such as beauty, devotion, or integrity cannot, by definition, be compared. There is no mathematic formula that could possibly allow one to calculate just how much personal integrity it is right to sacrifice in the pursuit of art, or how to balance responsibilities to your family with responsibilities to your God. One might put it this way: if value is simply what one considers important, then money allows importance to take a liquid form, enables us to compare precise quantities of importance and trade one off against the other. On the other hand, its very liquidity, its undifferentiated nature, has always made such value seem somewhat tawdry. After all, if someone does accumulate a very large amount of money, the first thing they are likely to do is to try to convert it into something unique, whether it be Monet's *Water Lilies*, a prize-winning race-horse, or an endowed chair at a university.

What is really at stake here in any market economy is precisely the ability to make these trades, to convert 'value' into 'values'. We all are striving to put ourselves in a posi- tion where we can dedicate ourselves to something larger than ourselves. The moment you put it that way, though, it becomes clear that conservatives do not really have a monopoly on value

had been effectively limited to white males. Poor white folk saw a rapidly shrinking pie of public funds and innumerable barriers, and for the most part, their understandable reaction is to say that the sorts of knowledge and attainment higher education offers isn't all it's cracked up to be anyway – that religious wisdom, or commercial savvy, patriotism or moral virtues are really worth a thousand times more. Religion in particular offers an explicit critique of dominant forms of knowledge: a radical challenge to assumptions about what's really important or valuable in life and what sort of people have the right to make judgements on such matters. But here we begin to move outside the domain of what can be explained simply in terms of political economy, and into what in the US has come to be referred to as the 'Culture Wars'. If people vote against their obvious economic interests, then, it can only be because one cannot, really, separate the economic issues from social and cultural ones. Liberal commentators' insistence on separating these two is precisely what makes it difficult for them to see what's really going on.

In the next section, then, I begin by fast-forwarding two years to 2006 – the year the Democrats finally won – to another tell-tale clash between Bush and Kerry. I think examining that clash opens up possibilities for a way to transcend the division. This is what I argued in my *Harper's* article (Graeber, 2007), which forms the basis for the second part of this article.

Value transformation and the liberal ideal

Let us fast-forward, then, to the 2006 congressional elections in which the Democratic Party, riding a wage of popular fury of Bush's bungled and interminable war in Iraq, finally swept back into control of both houses of Congress. The one fleeting moment of hope for Republicans during that particular campaign was afforded by a lame joke by Senator John Kerry – a

joke pretty obviously aimed at George Bush – which they took to suggest that Kerry thought that only those who flunked out of school end up in the military. It was all very disingenuous. Most knew perfectly well Kerry's real point was to suggest the president wasn't very bright. But the Right smelled blood. The problem with 'aristo-slackers' like Kerry, wrote one National Review blogger, is that they assume 'the troops are in Iraq not because they are deeply committed to the mission (they need to deny that) but rather because of a system that takes advantage of their lack of social and economic opportunities We should clobber them with that ruthlessly until the day of the election – just like we did in '04 – because it is the most basic reason they deserve to lose.'

As it turned out, it did not make a lot of difference. Most Americans had apparently by that time decided they were not deeply committed to the mission either (insofar as they were even sure what that mission was). But I think this particular exchange – ironically, between a perceived member of the 'liberal elite' who was a genuine war-hero, and a president who had when of military age managed to use his elite connections to avoid having ever gone to war at all – is particularly telling. Right-wing populism, in fact, tends to invariably combine hostility to the 'liberal elite' described earlier with an endless call to 'support our troops', who that same liberal elite is invariably accused of disrespecting. It strikes me this argument in particular is a perfect example of the pointlessness of reducing all such issues to an either/or: patriotism vs opportunity, values vs bread-and- butter issues like jobs and education. Do working-class Americans join the Army because they are deprived of opportunities? This seems undeniable. But the real question to be asking is: opportunities to do what?

Americans do not see themselves as a nation of frustrated altruists. Quite the opposite: our normal habits of thought tend towards a rough and ready cynicism. The world is a giant marketplace; everyone is in it for a buck; if you want to under-

Proposition II: The political Right has always tried to enhance this division, and thus claim to be champions of both egoism and altruism simultaneously. The Left has tried to efface it. Might this not help to explain why the US, the most market-driven industrialized society on earth, is also the most religious? Or, even more strikingly, why the country that produced Tolstoy and Dostoevsky spent much of the 20th century trying to eradicate both the market and religion entirely?

Where the political Left has always tried to efface this distinction – whether by trying to create economic systems that are not driven by the profit motive, or by replacing private charity with one or another form of community support – the political Right has always thrived on it. In the US, for example, the Republican Party is dominated by two ideologi- cal wings: the libertarians and the 'Christian right'. At one extreme, Republicans are free market fundamentalists and advocates of individual liberties; on the other, they are funda- mentalists of a more literal variety, suspicious of most individual liberties but enthusiastic about biblical injunctions, 'family values' and charitable good works. At first glance it might seem remarkable such an alliance manages to hold together at all. But in fact right- wing coalitions almost always take some variation of this form. One might say that the conservative approach always has been to release the dogs of the market, throwing all traditional verities into disarray; and then, in this tumult of insecurity, offering themselves up as the last bastion of order and hierarchy, the stalwart defenders of the authority of churches and fathers against the barbarians they have themselves unleashed. A scam it may be, but a remarkably effective one; and one effect is that the right ends up seeming to have a monopoly on value. They manage, we might say, to occupy both positions, on either side of the divide: extreme egoism and extreme altruism.

Consider, now, the word 'value' itself (cf. Graeber, 2001). When economists speak about value they are really talking

of shared enjoyment, the desire to show up a rival and so on. These are the motivations that impel the major dramas of our lives, but that social theorists, for some reason, tend to ignore. If one travels to parts of the world where money and markets do not exist – say, to certain parts of New Guinea or Amazonia – such complicated webs of motivation are precisely what one still finds. In societies where most people live in small communities, where almost everyone they know is either a friend, a relative or an enemy, the languages spoken tend even to lack words that cor- respond to 'self-interest' or 'altruism', while including very subtle vocabularies for describing envy, solidarity, pride and the like (cf. Mauss, 1925). Their economic dealings with one another likewise tend to be based on much more subtle principles. Anthropolo- gists have created a vast literature to try to fathom the dynamics of these apparently exotic 'gift economies', but if it seems odd to us to see, say, important men conniving with their cousins to finagle vast wealth, which they then present as gifts to bitter enemies in order to publicly humiliate them, it is because we are so used to operating inside imper- sonal markets that it never occurs to us to think how we would act if we had an economic system where we treated people based on how we actually felt about them.

Nowadays, the work of destroying such ways of life, whether in the Andes or high- lands of Papua New Guinea, is largely left to missionaries – representatives of those very world religions that originally sprung up in reaction to the market long ago. Almost invari- ably, they end up trying to convince people to be more selfish, and more altruistic, at the same time. On the one hand, they set out to teach the 'natives' proper work discipline, and to try to get them involved with buying and selling products on the market, so as to better their material lot. At the same time, they explain to them that ultimately, material things are unimportant, and lecture on the value of the higher things, such as selfless devotion to others.

stand why something happened, first ask who stands to gain by it. The same attitudes expressed in the back rooms of bars are echoed in the highest reaches of social science. America's great con- tribution to the world in the latter respect has been the development of 'rational choice' theories, which proceed from the assumption that all human behaviour can be understood as a matter of economic calculation, of rational actors trying to get as much as possible out of any given situation with the least cost to themselves. As a result, in most fields, the very existence of altruistic behaviour is considered a kind of puzzle, and everyone from economists to evolutionary biologists have made themselves famous through attempts to 'solve' it – that is, to explain the mystery of why bees sacrifice themselves for hives or human beings hold open doors and give correct street directions to total strangers. At the same time, the case of the military bases suggests the possibility that in fact Americans, particularly the less affluent ones, are haunted by frustrated desires to do good in the world. It would not be difficult to assemble evidence that this is the case. Studies of charita- ble giving, for example, have always shown the poor to be the most generous. Moreover, charity represents only a tiny part of the picture. If one were to break down what the typi- cal American wage-earner does with his/her money one would likely find they give most of it away. Take a typical male head of household. About a third of his annual income is likely to end up being redistributed to strangers, through taxes and charity; another third he is likely to give in one way or another to his children; of the remainder, probably the largest part is given to or shared with others: presents, trips, parties, the six-pack of beer for the local softball game. One might object that this latter is more a reflection of the real nature of pleasure than anything else (who would want to eat a delicious meal at an expensive restaurant all by themselves?) but itself this is half the point. Even our self- indulgences tend to be dominated by the logic of the gift. Similarly, many would cer- tainly ar-

gue that shelling out a small fortune to send one's children to an exclusive kindergarten is more about status than altruism. Clearly there is something to this. But if you look at what happens over the course of people's actual lives, it soon becomes appar- ent this kind of behaviour fulfils an identical psychological need. How many youthful idealists throughout history have managed to finally come to terms with a world based on selfishness and greed the moment they start a family? If one were to assume altruism was the primary human motivation, this would make perfect sense: the only way they can convince themselves to abandon their desire to do right by the world as a whole is to substitute an even more powerful desire to do right by their children.

What all this suggests to me is that American society might well work completely differently than we tend to assume. Imagine, for a moment, that the US as it exists today was the creation of some ingenious social engineer. What assumptions about human nature could we say this engineer must have been working with? Certainly nothing like rational choice theory. For clearly our social engineer understands that the only way to convince human beings to enter into the world of work and the marketplace (that is, of mind-numbing labour and cut-throat competition) is to dangle the prospect of thereby being able to lavish money on one's children, buy drinks for one's friends and, if one hits the jackpot, to be able to spend the rest of one's life endowing museums and providing AIDS medications to impoverished countries in Africa. Where our theorists are con- stantly trying to strip away the veil of appearances and show how all such apparently selfless gestures really mask some kind of self-interested strategy, in reality, American society is better conceived as a battle over access to the means to behave altruistically. Selflessness – or at least, the right to engage in high-minded activity – is not the strategy. It is the prize.

If nothing else, I think this helps us understand why the Right has been so much better, in recent years, at playing to populist sentiments than the Left. Essentially, they do it by accusing liberals of cutting ordinary Americans off from the right to do good in the world. Let me explain what I mean here by throwing out a series of propositions.

Proposition I: Neither egoism nor altruism are natural urges; they in fact arise in relation to one another and neither would be conceivable without the market. First of all, I should make clear that I do not believe that either egoism or altruism is somehow inherent to human nature. Actually, I do not believe they are particularly useful theoretical terms at all: rarely are they useful explanations for concrete forms of human interaction. Ordinary human motivations tend to be far more possible. Rather egoism or altruism are ideas we have about human nature. Historically, one tends to arise in response to the other. In the ancient world, for example, it is precisely at the times and places that one sees the emer- gence of money and impersonal markets that one also sees the rise of world religions: Buddhism, Christianity and later Islam. If one sets aside a space and says, 'Here you shall think only about acquiring material things for yourself', then it is hardly surprising that before long someone else will set aside a countervailing space, declaring, in effect: 'Yes, but *here,* we must contemplate the fact that the self, and material things, are ulti- mately unimportant.' It was these latter institutions, of course, that first developed our modern notions of charity.

Even today, when we operate outside the domain of the market or of religion, very few of our actions could be said to be motivated by anything so simple as untrammelled greed or selfless generosity. When we are dealing not with strangers but with friends, relatives, or enemies, a much more complicated set of motivations will generally come into play: envy, solidarity, pride, self-destructive grief, loyalty, romantic obsession, resentment, spite, shame, conviviality, the anticipation