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Yes, Politics is a Zero-Sum Game

Kevin Carson

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I find fodder for op-eds in some of the strangest places. I came across this video (“Politics is NOT a zero-sum game,” by Shai Davidai) in a HIT posted on Amazon Mechanical Turk by Davidai — an academic study in which he gauged viewers’ reactions to it. (For those who don’t know, Mechanical Turk is a microtasking platform where people can perform tasks — HITs — like participate in surveys posted by academic researchers.)

Until the video inspired me to write this column, I was familiar with Shai Davidai mainly as a Mechanical Turk requester. Turns out he’s also a social psychologist and Assistant Professor in the Management Division of Columbia Business School. Although he’s currently famous primarily for other, more unfortunate reasons, my concern today is solely with addressing the arguments in the video, and his related work. Davidai’s academic specialization, “the psychology of judgment and decision making, economic inequality and social mobility, social comparisons, and zero-sum thinking,” is useful background for understanding where he’s coming from with the arguments he makes in the video.

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At the outset, he states that “politics is a game where we all win, or lose, together.” In a further claim suggestive of a likely orientation toward interest group pluralism, he continues: “There is no fixed, predetermined number of people who can, or can’t, influence the direction of this country.” As evidence that consensus predominates over conflict in American politics, he cites the fact that “most laws get support from both sides of the political aisle.” Many politicians, as well, “share many interests and priorities.” It follows that “[w]hen one party passes a bill, it does not have to come at another party’s expense.” Similarly, we and our fellow citizens of all political persuasions care, deep down, about the same thing — “the United States of America.” “Just like cars on the freeway, we are all moving in the same direction. Despite our differences, we are all working toward the same goals.” At the end, he restates the claim of the title: “politics is simply not a zero-sum game.”

Given Davidai’s negative framing of zero-sum views of the world, it probably shouldn’t come as a surprise that he’s produced a considerable body of work on zero-sum perceptions, and the psychological and ideological factors that contribute to them. Although — aside from the video — he doesn’t come right out and dismiss zero-sum views as such as illegitimate, he consistently treats them as something to be psychologized away rather than a serious hypothesis about the structure of society. In a classic display of centrist horseshoe theory, he uses parallel quotes from Bernie Sanders (about billionaires) and Donald Trump (about Mexican immigrants) as the epigraph to “The politics of zero-sum thinking,” coauthored with Martino Ongis. The gist of his comparison between liberal and conservative versions of zero-sum thinking is that the former are more apt to view the social and economic status quo as zero-sum, while the latter see attempts to change the status quo as coming at the direct expense of people like themselves.

The closest he comes to assessing the factual validity of zero-sum views is this statement: “Although pure zero-sum

situations are rare, many people perceive non-zero-sum situations as zero-sum, believing that one person's gains are balanced by another person's losses." Further, he argues, zero-sum thinking has "adverse consequences" — e.g. it "increases people's feeling that they are being taken advantage of and that the social system is illegitimate and unjust." Apparently the question of whether the social system is, in fact, illegitimate and unjust is unworthy of serious consideration.

The arguments in Davidai's video don't stand up well to factual examination. First of all, there's no correlation between the facts that a majority of bills are passed with bipartisan support, and a majority of Americans agree on most issues. Treating them as related phenomena assumes that the American system is actually democratic, and that public sentiment is the primary influence on legislation.

Policies that have bipartisan support in Congress, and never appear as matters for political debate, involve things that are structurally central to the functioning of the American model of capitalism. They are things that both wings of the capitalist class, represented by the two parties, agree on. Both major parties overwhelmingly agree on fundamental things like the nature of capitalist land ownership and credit, copyright maximalism, the idea that the state should massively subsidize the major input costs of corporate capitalism, and the role of the United States as global enforcer of a neoliberal economic order.

On the other hand, large popular majorities are in favor of things like single-payer health insurance, that are non-starters in Congress. In any case where the majority consensus of the general public contradicts the consensus of American capital, the latter prevails.

All the things that show up as actual issues in mainstream political debate are second-order problems that take the basic class and institutional structure of society for granted. "Moderate" proposals are those which can be administered through the existing institutional framework, by the sorts of people

who are currently running things. “Extremist” proposals, on the other hand, call for fundamental changes in systemic structure. As Noam Chomsky once put it:

The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum — even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there’s free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate.

Let me preemptively add, at the risk of poisoning the well, that this is not a “conspiracy theory.” As Edward Herman and Chomsky pointed out in *Manufacturing Consent*, no central coordination is required — it’s mostly a set of automatic filtering mechanisms that operate by an invisible hand process.

And despite the egalitarian language — “your friends, colleagues, and neighbors” — we aren’t all “just folks,” irrespective of class, who are motivated primarily by love of country. To quote Howard Zinn:

We have been led to believe that, from the beginning, as our Founding Fathers put it in the Preamble to the Constitution, it was “we the people” who established the new government after the Revolution....

Our culture demands, in its very language, that we accept a commonality of interest binding all of us to one another. We mustn’t talk about classes....

[Our present leaders] bombard us with phrases like “national interest,” “national security,” and “national defense” as if all of these concepts applied equally to all of us, colored or white, rich

or poor, as if General Motors and Halliburton have the same interests as the rest of us, as if George Bush has the same interest as the young man or woman he sends to war.

Surely, in the history of lies told to the population, this is the biggest lie. In the history of secrets, withheld from the American people, this is the biggest secret: that there are classes with different interests in this country. To ignore that — not to know that the history of our country is a history of slave-owner against slave, landlord against tenant, corporation against worker, rich against poor — is to render us helpless before all the lesser lies told to us by people in power.

As for the claim in the article cited above, that genuine zero-sum situations are rare, this is a strawman. It’s true that no transaction — aside from outright murder and robbery — is *completely* zero-sum, in the sense that one party experiences no benefit whatsoever from it. There must be some benefit from the transaction that at least marginally outweighs the cost for both parties, or they wouldn’t both participate. Nevertheless, a major share of economic transactions we participate in involve economic rents, in which one party — the landlord, the employer, the patent or copyright holder, the lender, the oligopoly seller — is able to set the price to the highest level consistent with the other party still being willing to come to the table. This is the classic textbook profit-maximizing price model.

The dominant influence on American government policy is a class whose wealth consists of economic rents and monopoly returns on artificial scarcities and artificial property rights, who get rich by extracting a surplus from workers and consumers. Our relationship with them is zero-sum. Another item for the list of things I never thought I’d have to explain to a college professor.