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Some notes on the spread of morality and sacred cows

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Conclusion

We are in the midst of an authoritarian phase following the revolts and movements of 2011-2016. Strongmen are being elected and taking power throughout the world. The Right in the US would rather die than admit any flaws in their glorious leader Trump. Young radicals, though insignificant and tame, are embracing Maoism, Communism, and the Democrats. The new radical tendencies are no longer anarchist, but are instead either authority-neutral, like the Tiqqunists, or pro-authority, like eco-extremism.

The Left is unlikely to gain power, but we are probably entering an era of extreme crisis due to environmental catastrophe. The last time serious global crisis took place, during the 1930s, elements of the capitalist class allowed the Left some breathing room in order to curb the short-term-gain profit mentality with a dose of medium-term intelligence embodied in social democracy. It's entirely possible that this will happen again, but who knows? The Left is unfortunately not dead. Let's recognize their mechanisms for gaining power.

Notes

Note 1: This segment of the "Breaking the Spell" documentary about the Seattle WTO protests in 1999 showcases it pretty well. (<https://youtu.be/D2MxtwAmeOY?t=3019>)

This dynamic is likely not conscious. The Left was born as a faction of the central governing body in the early Republican phase of the French Revolution, a highly stressful time. During the especially crisis-stricken Year II, when the Left had power, they turned on each other and created an atmosphere where nobody could voice what everyone was thinking, for fear of being sent to the guillotine. Then, like now, they were up against concentrated wealth and power, and used whatever weapons available to them to both stay alive and attempt to defeat their enemies.

Similar to shame, sacred cows can be weapons picked up and used by the weak. But they are a different kind of weapon than illegibility, running away, playing dumb, etc. The latter are tools to avoid or escape systems of control. The former, tactics to spread one's ideology and take power. The sacred cows of the Left are the inheritance of the National Convention and guillotine, in that they aim to create and empower something above us all for the sake of social control.

Though anti-oppression language existed in the Sixties and Seventies, it was situated among a Left that had muscle. Contrast that to now. The only place the Left has anything remotely like power is in cultural production, its ability to define elements of contemporary society's common sense. This power largely resides in the moral psychological wage, as well as social pressure. Avenues for changing policy, altering the physical layout of the world, managing wealth, ending patriarchy, etc are closed off to the Left. Shame and sacred cows, on the other hand, are available to them. Taking over the means of production, or even just providing Flint with clean drinking water, is considerably more difficult than calling out one's peers and the occasional powerful man. As low-hanging fruit, doing this becomes a fixation for frustrated people, aided by the public and viral nature of social media technology.

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When someone tells me that white people need to be good allies to black people, and follow their leadership, I prepare myself for a daunting conversation, with landmines everywhere. First, I must demonstrate I understand that black people are oppressed. Then, it is expected for me to show what I'm doing to combat that oppression. If I'm not doing something that looks like traditional anti-racist work, I have to explain why. If I don't fall back on the sacred cow's logic, I risk my reputation being tarnished via accusations of racism or, at minimum, extreme callousness. More likely than not, I'm going to avoid people who talk like this, because there's so much pressure to prove oneself via their sacred cows.

If talking through this stuff is so important, why make it so difficult? Clearly the goal is not to facilitate understanding, or to get to the root of the problem, but instead to promote a party line. Sacred cows are a technology of morality that ensure we do not raise critical dialogue about values in question. They appear when an ideology is ascendant or clamoring for ascendancy. Make sure certain things are off the table for critique, and nobody will dare openly question them. Authoritarian regimes impose their will with secret police, censorship, and displays of punishment meant to intimidate their subjects into submission. While social justice liberalism does not come close to the violence and terror of the Stasi or Chekha, the structure is the same. You must guard your language around people you do not explicitly trust in case they would betray you to others. We are reminded every month or two, with public callouts and ostracization, what happens to people who say the wrong thing. Again, the severity is not even close, but the comparison is fair. Both aim to produce a chilling effect in order to limit what ideas can circulate or become dominant. I point this out not to monger fear or over-inflate the threat of social justice morality, but to point out that we are being trained to accept an authoritarian dynamic for social control. If the Left were to become more powerful, its work is half-done, because we're already conditioned to tolerate and tremble before its repressive mechanisms.

Ressentiment

Would these psychological traps work for healthy or contented people? Would they really feel the need to compare themselves to others in order to have any value?

We are born into this society as losers. Capitalism won hundreds of years ago and it conditions our lives from the get-go. Rather than accept our lot in life, which would be depressing, we cling to the psychological value added to us by morality. If we were to really go up against these systems, a la guerrilla warfare like the Black Liberation Army or Conspiracy Cells of Fire, we would be crushed. Instead, we cope. We use psychological systems that label us winners of some sort, even if it's only in a limited capacity. For example, that capitalism and white supremacy are strong, and us weak, bequeaths us an "underdog" status. Underdog sounds a lot nicer than loser. Morality, like cults, seduces us by sensing our weakness and promising us the world. All we must give in return is our obedience.

Sacred Cows

Morality protects itself by creating and wearing the armor of sacred cows. "Sacred cow" is a euphemism for something being off-limits for criticism. To disagree with a group's sacred cows is to risk being ostracized. Thus, nobody wants to talk about sacred cows or do anything that implies they oppose them or the way they frame a situation. Any argument or point that goes against one, or even offers it friendly critique, must be defended on the terms of the Sacred Cow itself. This is another part of the reason why the Christian Right and Social Justice Left appear so corny. Their collective idea-spaces contain so many sacred cows that none internal to their groups can point out to each other how ridiculous they look, in fear of violating some rule.

Humorless, self-righteous, intolerant, cringe-worthy. Ten years ago these words would have aptly described the Christian Right. Their very serious allegiance to silly ideas like God and patriotism made them an easy target to mock and troll. But now, said labels bring to mind awkward privilege confessions and the moralistic tone of social justice-oriented Leftists. What's happened in such a short time to cause this total reversal?

The new, internet-based Right has unfortunately been loudest in pointing out "virtue signaling," the practice of publicly professing moralistic platitudes. It's done to show off one's awareness and adherence to an increasingly popular set of values regarding systems of oppression. To put it simply, it demonstrates that you're woke. While there is certainly an allure to boasting, this critique is only half of the picture. What about virtue itself?

I take virtue to mean morality, a prepackaged set of ethics and worldviews. Morality develops with and propagates a social force aspiring for power. It grows intertwined with both hegemonic systems of power, and counter-hegemonic forces vying to overthrow them. Some examples of hegemony and counter-hegemony are capitalism and communism during the Cold War. Or, in present day, capitalism is hegemonic, while fundamentalist Islam and a resurgent far-right are counter-hegemonic. Morality's role for these leviathans is to seduce us into becoming their appendages by offering us a psychological wage, which both grants us the belief that we're better than others, and gives our lives meaning in a meaningless world. Once morality has rooted inside enough of us, it protects itself through the creation of sacred cows which aids it in spreading tendrils across the world.

Good, aka Better

What is a psychological wage? In exchange for our toil performing moralistic duties, we are paid with feelings and beliefs that we

are better than other people. For example, social media feels terrible. Even capitalist common sense will admit it for the moment. But for moral crusaders, whose mission entails spreading their gospel, this discomfort is the labor for which they receive positive feelings about themselves. One gives up personal comfort in exchange for the belief, and resulting sense of self-satisfaction, that they embody what morality has designated as “good.” And goodness is only meaningful in contrast to those who are cast as “bad.” The feeling of being good is just that of being better than others. This causes the warping effect of martyrdom where receiving abuse feels pleasurable. You are not just being yelled at and insulted, you are engaging in Sacrifice.

Occasionally I see a pro-life activist praying outside of an abortion clinic or Planned Parenthood, holding a rosary or bible. Through their posture, their hands held together in supposed prayer, and their gaze aimed to the distance at nobody in particular, they are trying to show us sinners that they’re in communion with God. Like the social justice liberals, they have a righteous mission that will earn them animosity, which is just what they want. From the discomfort they feel when people yell at them, they gain smug self-satisfaction.

This partially explains what’s so off about the social justice warrior and the Christian right-winger. Because they are receiving a psychological wage, they don’t care as much if they come off looking ridiculous. They are getting something out of the experience which distracts from that, or disguises their “persecution” as an inevitable consequence of doing the Lord’s work.

We all seem to have our own symbols of status, things that make us feel better than others: wealth, knowledge, scene cred, artistic talent, having nice things, various types of expertise, etc. But, compared to these, morality is especially heinous, because it creates Sacred Cows to guard itself from critique.

Perhaps anarchists radicalized since Ferguson haven’t experienced this, but there used to be smug pacifists at demonstrations

who took pleasure in acting good in contrast to us bad anarchists.(note 1) Reaching no further than the low-hanging pacifist fruit that the system took from the civil rights movement to protect itself, they got to feel the psychological boon of being good in contrast to anarchists.

Though caught up in its own “selfless” acts of sacrifice, morality is actually easy. It gives its adherents a prepackaged set of instructions for living a set of values. With morality, it is not necessary to stumble through the world, feel out different values and ideas, adopt some, try to live up to them, ditch or tweak them, etc. Instead, it provides a pre-configured value system. This is especially relevant for activists and others “in the know” about systems of oppression, because these worldviews cast us all as complicit in violence just by going about our daily lives. If we know mass suffering exists, and that something about us (our skin color, participation in the economy, gender, etc) perpetuates this suffering, then the Existentialist tasks of struggling to find our own reasons to live and values to live up to seem like decadent luxuries. We create a social justice cop in our heads who tells us, “people are dying NOW. People are suffering NOW. So close your books, quit your self-centered wandering, and go save them NOW.”

Duty is a curious thing to find in the First World during the 21st century. This rotting corpse of a concept brings to mind a uninformed Prussian military officer adorned in clinking medallions, or an arranged marriage that young people go through for the sake of their families. Its logic appears to be inherently pre-Sixties. But is that true? What, then, are contemporary ally politics? Duty did not die. Its central role as a value during WWII and the conservative Fifties is what allowed it to so easily translate into the anti-imperialism and anti-oppression activism of the Sixties and Seventies; as well as the non-revolutionary times of today.