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Army of Altruists

On the alienated right to do good

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> You know, education, if you make the most of it, you study hard, you do your homework and you make an effort to be smart, you can do well. If you don't, you get stuck in Iraq.
>
> John Kerry (D-Mass.)
>
> Kerry owes an apology to the many thousands of Americans serving in Iraq, who answered their country's call because they are patriots and not because of any deficiencies in their education.
>
> John McCain (R-Ariz.)

THE ONE FLEETING MOMENT OF HOPE FOR REPUBLICANS DURING the lead-up to the 2006 congressional elections came 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 didn't make a lot of difference, because most Americans decided they were not deeply committed to the mission either – insofar as they were even sure what the mission was. But it seems to me the question we should really be asking is: why did it take a military catastrophe (and a strategy of trying to avoid any association with the kind of northeastern elites Kerry for so many typified) to allow the congressional democrats to finally come out of the political wilderness? Or even more: why has this Republican line proved so effective?

It strikes me that to get at the answer, one has to probe far more deeply into the nature of American society than most commentators, nowadays, are willing to go. We're used to reducing all such issues to an either/or: patriotism versus opportunity, values versus bread-and-butter issues like jobs and education. It seems to me though that just framing things this way plays into the hands of the Right. Certainly, most people do join the army because they are deprived of opportunities. But the real question to be asking is: opportunities to do what?

I'm an anthropologist and what follows might be considered an anthropological perspective on the question. It first came home to me a year or two ago when I was attending a lecture by Catherine Lutz, a fellow anthropologist from Brown who has been studying U.S. military bases overseas. Many of these bases organize outreach programs, in which soldiers venture out to repair schoolrooms or

life of adventure and camaraderie in which they believe they are doing something genuinely noble. They join the Army because they want to be like you.

to perform free dental checkups for the locals. These programs were created to improve local relations, but in this task they often proved remarkably ineffective. Why, then, did the army not abandon them? The answer was that the programs had such enormous psychological impact on the soldiers, many of whom would wax euphoric when describing them: e.g., "*This* is why I joined the army"; "This is what military service is really all about – not just defending your country, but helping people." Professor Lutz is convinced that the main reason these programs continue to be funded is that soldiers who take part in them are more likely to reenlist. The military's own statistics are no help here: the surveys do not list "helping people" among the motive for reenlistment. Interestingly, it is the most high-minded option available – "patriotism" – that is the overwhelming favorite.

Certainly, 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 understand 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 contribution to the world in the latter respect has been the development of "rational choice" theories, which proceed from the assumption that all human behavior 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 behavior 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, particu-

larly 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 charitable giving, for example, have always shown the poor to be the most generous: the lower one's income, the higher the proportion of it that one is likely to give away to strangers. The same pattern holds true, incidentally, when comparing the middle classes and the rich: one study of tax returns in 2003 concluded that if the most affluent families had given away as much of their assets even as the average middle class family, overall charitable donations that year would have increased by 25 billion dollars. (All this despite the fact the wealthy have far more time and opportunity). Moreover, charity represents only a tiny part of the picture. If one were to break down what the typical American wage earner does with his 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, some might object that shelling out a small fortune to send one's children to an exclusive kindergarten is more about status than altruism. Perhaps: but if you look at what happens over the course of people's actual lives, it soon becomes apparent this kind of behavior fulfills 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 were the primary human motivation, this would make perfect

suits: say, to join the world of charities, or NGOs, or to become a political activist. But it is equally true if one wants to pursue values like Beauty or Truth: to become part of the world of books, or the art world, or an investigative reporter. The custom effectively seals off any such career for any poor student who actually does attain a liberal arts education. Such structures of exclusion had always existed of course, especially at the top, but in recent decades fences have become fortresses.

If that mechanic's son – or daughter – wishes to pursue something higher, more noble, for a career, what options does she really have? Likely just two. She can seek employment with her local church, which is hard to get. Or she 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 way, 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 the hell out of 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 teenager, they want to escape the world of tedious work and meaningless consumerism, to live a

tire history of radical thought. During the twentieth century, this was precisely the situation most likely to spark revolts and insurrections – revolutionary heroes from Chairman Mao to Fidel Castro almost invariably turn out to be children of poor parents who scrimped to give their children a bourgeois education, only to discover that a bourgeois education does not, in itself, guarantee entry into the bourgeoisie. By the late sixties and early seventies, the very point where the expansion of the university system hit a dead end, campuses were, predictably, exploding.

What followed could be seen as a kind of settlement. Campus radicals were reabsorbed into the university, but set to work largely at training children of the elite. As the cost of education has skyrocketed, financial aid has been cut back, and the government has begun aggressively pursuing student loan debts that once existed largely on paper, the prospect of social mobility through education – above all liberal arts education – has been rapidly diminished. The number of working-class students in major universities, which steadily grew until at least the late sixties, has now been declining for decades. If working-class Bush voters tend to resent intellectuals more than they do the rich, then, the most likely reason is because they can imagine scenarios in which they might become rich, but cannot imagine one in which they, or any of their children, could ever become members of the intelligentsia? If you think about it, this is not an unreasonable assessment. A mechanic from Nebraska knows it is highly unlikely that his son or daughter will ever become an Enron executive. But it is possible. There is virtually no chance on the other hand that his child, no matter how talented, will ever become an international human rights lawyer, or a drama critic for the *New York Times*. Here we need to remember not just the changes in higher education, but also the role that unpaid, or effectively unpaid, internships. It has become a fact of life in the United States that if one chooses a career for any reason other than the money, for the first year or two one will not be paid. This is certainly true if one wishes to be involved in altruistic pur-

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 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 United States as it exists today were 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 labor 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 constantly trying to strip away the veil of appearances and show how all such apparently selfless gesture really mask some kind of self-interested strategy, in reality, American society is better conceived as a battle over access to the right 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 are 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 are somehow inherent to human nature.

Human motives are rarely that simple. 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 in the times and places as one sees the emergence of money and markets that one also sees the rise of world religions – Buddhism, Christianity, and 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 ultimately 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 untrammeled greed or utterly 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 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, that great novelists like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky immortalize, 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 correspond to "self-interest" or "altruism," while including very subtle vocabularies for describing envy, solidarity, pride and the like. Their economic dealings with one another likewise tend to be based on much more subtle principles. Anthropologists have created a vast literature to try to fathom the dynamics of these

dramatic class mobility through academic accomplishment – are increasingly unusual in America.

America of course continues to see itself as a land of opportunity, and certainly from the perspective of an immigrant from Haiti or Bangladesh, it is. No doubt in terms of overall social mobility, we still compare favorably to countries like Bolivia or France. But America has always been a country built on the promise of *unlimited* upward mobility. The working-class condition has been traditionally seen as a way station, as something one's family passes through on the road to something better. Lincoln used to stress that what made American democracy possible was the absence of a class of permanent wage laborers. In Lincoln's day, the ideal was that it was mainly immigrants who worked as wage laborers, and that they did so in order to save up enough money to do something else: if nothing else, to buy some land and become a homesteader on the frontier.

The point is not how accurate this ideal was; the point was most Americans have found the image plausible. Every time the road is perceived to be clogged, profound unrest ensues. The closing of the frontier led to bitter labor struggles, and over the course of the twentieth century, the steady and rapid expansion of the American university system could be seen as a kind of substitute. Particularly after World War II, huge resources were poured into expanding the higher education system, which grew extremely rapidly, and all this was promoted quite explicitly as a means of social mobility. This served during the Cold War as almost an implied social contract, not just offering a comfortable life to the working classes but holding out the chance that their children would not be working-class themselves.

The problem, of course, is that a higher education system cannot be expanded forever. 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 also have access to the en-

seem to think their way past it. After the last presidential election, the big debate in progressive circles was the relative importance of economic issues versus what was called "the culture wars." Did the Democrats lose because they were not able to spell out any plausible economic alternatives, 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 me illustrate what I mean by considering the strange popular appeal, at least until recently, of George W. Bush. In 2004, most of the American liberal intelligentsia did not seem to be able to get their heads around it. After the election, what left so many of them reeling was their suspicion that the things they most hated about Bush were exactly what so many Bush voters liked about him. Consider the debates, for example. If statistics are to be believed, millions of Americans who watched George Bush and John Kerry lock horns, concluded that Kerry won, and then went off and voted for Bush anyway. It was hard to escape the suspicion that in the end, Kerry's articulate presentation, his skill with words and arguments, had actually counted against him.

This sends liberals into spirals of despair. They cannot understand why decisive leadership is equated with acting like an idiot. Neither can they understand how a man who comes from one of the most elite families in the country, who attended Andover, Yale, and Harvard, and whose signature facial expression is a selfsatisfied smirk, could ever convince anyone he was a "man of the people." I must admit I have struggled with this as well. As a child of working class parents who won a scholarship to Andover in the 1970s and eventually, a job at Yale, I have spent much of my life in the presence of men like Bush., everything about them oozing self-satisfied privilege. But in fact, stories like mine – stories of

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 impersonal 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 is largely left to missionaries – representatives of those very world religions that originally sprung up in reaction to the market long ago. Missionaries, of course, are out to save souls; but this rarely interpret this to mean their role is simply to teach people to accept God and be more altruistic. Almost invariably, 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 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.

PROPOSITION II: The political right has always tried to enhance this division, and thus claim to be champions of egoism and altruism simultaneously. The left has tried to efface it.

MIGHT THIS NOT help to explain why the United States, 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 twentieth 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 community support – the political right has always thrived on it. In the United States, for example, the Republican party is dominated by two ideological wings: the libertarians, and

the "Christian right." At one extreme, Republicans are free-market fundamentalists and advocates of individual liberties (even if they see those liberties largely as a matter of consumer choice); on the other, they are fundamentalists 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 (and certainly they have ongoing tensions, most famously over abortion). 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, for a moment, the word "value." When economists talk about value they are really talking 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 motivated by pretty much anything other 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" (which is unsurprising, since by far the most common form of unpaid labor in most industrial societies is child-rearing and housework), 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 favorite basketball team. All are seen as commitments that are, or ought to

be, uncorrupted 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. (Obviously, people do make these kind of compromises all the time. But they cannot be calculated). One might put it this way: if value is simply what one considers important, then money allows importance take a liquid form, enables us to compare precise quantities of importance and trade one off for the other. 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 this be Monet's water lilies, a prize-winning racehorse, 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 position where we can dedicate ourselves to something larger than ourselves. When liberals do well in America, it's because they can embody that possibility: the Kennedys, for example, are the ultimate Democratic icons not just because they started as poor Irish immigrants who made enormous amounts of money, but because they are seen as having managed, ultimately, to turn all that money into nobility.

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 is in such a mess. 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