

The Perils of Moral Narcissism

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Bernie Sanders' failed Democratic Party insurgency and Donald Trump's hostile takeover of the Republican Party reflect a dangerous fissure that has opened between the people and the establishment.

Large swaths of voters are angry with the establishment, which seethes with contempt for the people. Although not symmetrical, the dueling animosities are reinforcing and threaten the nation's long-term interest in the robust and civil exchange of opinion essential to constitutional self-government.

Voters, particularly those who are right of center, are angry *because* they perceive the contempt of the generally progressive establishment. Voter anger further inflames the establishment, which provokes voters' anger even more.

Citizens, it turns out, do not like to be regarded as “bitter” individuals who “cling to guns or religion or an antipathy to people who aren't like them,” as Barack Obama, speaking on the 2008 campaign trail, characterized working-class residents of the Rust Belt. Moreover, millions of Americans who believe the United States should control its borders, document those who enter the country, and enforce the immigration laws as written—opinions fully consistent with the rule of a law in a free society—resent the progressive establishment's equation of their views with racism and xenophobia.

Those casting anti-establishment votes this year also believe that the nation's governing class systematically disregards their opinions on an array of issues ranging from concern over the off-shoring of manufacturing jobs to U.S. primacy in foreign policy. Sizeable segments of America, and not only on the right, feel no benefit from the policies on which President Obama has staked his legacy: the Affordable Care Act; a path to legalization for people in the country unlawfully; costly measures to reduce the country's carbon footprint; and the Iran nuclear deal.

Voters also take offense at the crude deceptions peddled by those in power. From a nearly trillion-dollar stimulus bill in early 2009 that was supposed to fund mythical “shovel-ready jobs” to denying the sectarian motivations of Muslim terrorists, the Obama administration has betrayed a tendency to treat voters like children who can't handle the truth.

But it isn't only the Democratic Party establishment that has provoked unrest. Republican voters have noticed with growing displeasure that GOP members of Congress, too, have been spinning tall tales. In the 2010, 2012, and 2014 congressional elections, Republican candidates solemnly pledged to repeal Obamacare, cut spending and rein in the federal debt, and re-limit government. Yet without control of the White House these were empty promises. Consequently, in the summer of 2016 the GOP faithful have little to show for six years of big, bold talk.

It is by no means only the American people who are fed up with establishments. Britain's vote last month to leave the European Union sprang from a popular conviction that the United Kingdom should not delegate authority to distant, unelected, and popularly unaccountable bureaucrats in Brussels. The Brexit campaign's success has stirred up similar grievances and galvanized people elsewhere in the EU.

The transnational discontent with governing elites suggests that something is amiss within Western liberal democracy.

Roger L. Simon has a theory about the dysfunction of American politics that has explanatory power beyond our shores. In "I Know Best: How Moral Narcissism Is Undermining Our Republic, if It Hasn't Already," Simon argues that an excess of self-love is impairing the American capacity for self-government.

Like Narcissus of Greek mythology—mesmerized by his reflection in water, the handsome hunter gazed longingly upon his image until he died—human beings have always been susceptible to the psychological malady we call narcissism.

Distinctive to our era, according to Simon, is a special form of the general personality disorder. In the case of "moral narcissism," he writes, "What you believe, or claim to believe or *say* you believe—not what you do or how you act or what the results of your actions may be—defines you as a person and makes you 'good.'" The incidence of moral narcissism, he contends, has reached epidemic proportions.

A novelist, Academy Award-nominated screenwriter, and co-founder of PJ Media, Simon is in a good position to reflect on American politics, having journeyed from the civil-rights left of the 1960s to the limited-government right of today.

Simon is well aware that moral narcissism can be found among his political allies—in the belief that less government is always better government; in the opinion that government has the right and responsibility to impose traditional morality; and in the article of faith that America has the tools and the wherewithal to remake the world in its liberal and democratic image. But whereas on the right love of one's own moral posture is constrained by competing conservative impulses—particularly the tension between conserving tradition and expanding freedom—moral narcissism, according to Simon, is "a pathology that underlies the whole liberal Left ethic today."

The symptoms of our progressive establishment's moral narcissism are intellectual rigidity, self-righteousness, and disdain for those who disagree. Moral narcissism can be seen, for example, in the debate over climate change, in which, despite substantial imprecisions of measurement and genuine uncertainty about the causes, the left brooks no dissent about the dimensions, sources, or proper responses to climate change.

It also receives expression in the determination to find racism and sexism lurking everywhere—and in the assurance that where racism and sexism are invisible they are even more powerfully present, having burrowed into the deepest recesses of our unconscious and having been entombed in the very foundations of our political institutions.

It drives progressive policies on gun control, urban crime, and affirmative action that advance desirable goals—reduction in gun-related deaths, elimination of discrimination in law enforcement, diversity in education—but which defy constitutional limitations and disregard real world consequences.

Moral narcissism pervades our educational system. Instead of cultivating rigorous reasoning, inquiring minds, and appreciation of the diversity of views about freedom and equality that constitutes the American political tradition, many of our schools—from kindergarten through college—proselytize on behalf of progressive political aims.

Why are American progressives, and left-leaning elites throughout the West, prone to an intolerant love of their own moral beliefs and judgments? Prolonged control of the commanding heights of journalism, academia, and entertainment fosters arrogance. The belief, common among left-wing intellectual elites, that rational individuals will invariably arrive at the one right answer to public policy questions nurtures condescension or scorn for those who depart from progressive orthodoxy. And the inegalitarian conviction that it takes experts to design and implement, where necessary by subterfuge, policies advancing egalitarian norms encourages progressives to see themselves as the people's saviors rather than as their fellow citizens.

Backing the notoriously narcissistic Donald Trump is an odd way to combat such moral narcissism. Many, though, seem to believe that it's the only weapon they have to rein in an establishment that, infatuated with its own morals and manners, simultaneously panders to and patronizes the American people.

The establishment is not without options. By listening to the people's concerns, understanding their anxieties, and grasping the reasons for their choices, elites could take a significant step in reestablishing that democratic debate on which constitutional self-government depends.

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