

Behind the Times

Michael Burgess

There used to be a phrase, an ethical construct really. It was called enlightened self-interest. Basically, it means knowing which side your bread's really buttered on. I'm a little out of the loop these days and don't know if it's still in play. It would be good to think so. When it comes to the art of being human, there aren't a lot of sound working principles around anymore and it would be a shame, not to mention a foolish whistling for general pain and sadness, if enlightened self interest was relegated to copy for a personal hygiene commercial.

We live in interesting days. Much of our energy, and more of our time, is devoted to getting ahead. If a divided America has a common goal and mantra, that seems as close as we get. What unites us in our great melting pot of lifestyles is greed, disguised as personal and national fulfillment. The government and its citizens are Siamese twins joined at the wallet in a relationship that's more lust than love. It was not always thus. An old friend down the coast, who got his sailing dinghy floating again last week, wrote this to me: "Foreigners who come here now come for the cash and the lack of rules. They don't come here to become Americans. I fear there's nothing left to become."

Beat the drum slowly.

People come to the new world for the same reason most of us get up in the morning: not to celebrate the rising of the sun or to wonder at the mystery of being alive or continue our research into what it means to be human, but to beat the brush and tear up the floorboards looking for something that will make us feel better. Or, in current terms, to actualize ourselves and better our condition. From a nation based upon personal freedom, we've become a country without personal options. We must, without fail and in ways that increase our purchasing power, become all that we can be. To behave otherwise is morally suspect, socially unacceptable and a bad example for the children who now head most families. We must get ahead. We must get ahead because, by standing still, we fall behind; not just in the long run (another sadly neglected idea) but every minute of every dissatisfied and unfulfilled day. Simple minds inquire, getting ahead exactly of what?

I don't mean to alarm anyone but, in case you've been too busy to notice, the streets and malls of America are packed to the elbows with human beings behaving as if they were being run down by something too hideous to be defined. And they are. The mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who lived in a time when it was still fashionable to think about things, called it the "error of misplaced concreteness". It means assigning reality to something that doesn't have any. We are, as a soon to be global culture, being run down and eaten by our collective operational delusions. We're assigning reality to an 'it' we can get ahead of if we give it "a hundred and ten percent." (Somewhere, Alfred is hooting with laughter.)

It's an interesting fact, not appreciated nearly enough, that the notion of "progress" first arose in Western Europe in the 14th century. There was no progress before that; if, for no other reason, because there wasn't a word for it. People just did what they did, hoped for the best and, until organized religion made them stop, worshipped the ground they walked on. Sometimes things were good, sometimes they weren't. Life was just life. Silly and medieval but there it was, and so it remained until the machines of the Industrial Revolution broke the chains of ignorance that bound us to meaningful labor and replaced it with wages to spend in the company store. Two hundred and fifty years after the machines set us free, we have company malls, company amusement parks and company vacation destinations. (Pre-modern humans had no vacations and generally wintered where they summered.)

Progress this significant comes with a price. Free to be all we can be, when we fail to meet the personal goals set by a media whose personal goal is to make us dissatisfied and frightened enough to buy something or go somewhere dirt cheap and sunny to forget, we suffer the sort of shame and ostracism once reserved for lepers and thieves. This is the taboo called "the error of not measuring up." It is, when you think about it, a pretty funny world; one that hasn't been funny for some time.

Long before Deep Throat suggested it, we were all following the money. The sociopathic soul of capitalism lies in the shotgun marriage of money to progress. Money, lest we forget, began as a medium of exchange: a reflection of the value of goods and the human labor that produced them. It was a way of keeping count. Coupled to progress, it became a way to keep score. Being modern, we now understand that money is only partly about trading for what we need; the real purpose of money is to make more money. In terms of progress, this was a real breakthrough. The way to "make" money is to charge more for what make or do than it costs you to make or do it. Interestingly enough, there was once a sin called "usury". One committed it by charging interest on a loan.

In terms of progress, simple minds must ask: from what to what? Corporate capitalism believes devoutly that progress is best served when a few villagers own everything in the village. If possible, a village you've never seen, let alone visited. When life is a business, progress is indistinguishable

from profit. The more profit one can wring from a transaction (in economic terms, maximizing the swindle), the more capital there is: not to buy the kids shoes or put a new roof on the hut or help a neighbor whose barn burned down, but to invest in something, anything, that will turn more profit. This is called making your money work for you and is the demented engine that drives the global marketplace and the hapless "human and natural resources" it feeds into the machinery. The engine is fueled, not by progress, but by naked greed. Theirs and ours.

The most dangerous force in the universe is a bad idea that makes you feel good. The Dali Lama, who's driven by the notion of ending human suffering, believes the purpose of life is to find happiness. Interesting word, happiness. We're trained as children and brainwashed as adults to be happy only when we have what we want; which is, in nearly every case, obscenely more than we need. We're encouraged to live for today without being here now and progress as if there were no tomorrow. At a recent gathering of the pustulous greedhead: busily nailing down the details of EarthCorp, while mobs of furious technopeasants clawed at the gates to get at them, a third world minister asked his first world peer a simple question: "Are you rich because we are poor?"

The answer can be figured with a dull pencil. Wealthy nations, and wealthy people, aren't wealthy because they're smarter, or work harder, or are more virtuous. They're wealthy because they take more than they give, a trait they equate with having God on their side. Like most things, it boils down to priorities. Years ago, someone asked J. Paul Getty (who, for years, managed nearly a hundred businesses out of a cardboard box his servants hauled between hotel suites) why he thought it was, that out of all the humans on the planet, he was the richest. Without blinking, he answered: "Because what I care about most is money." When kidnappers sent Mr. Getty a ransom note along with his grandson's left ear, the richest man in the world stonewalled them. There's a secret here, hiding in plain sight.

Much of what our country does these days is explained, but in no way excused, in terms of pursuing our "national interests": a geopolitical version of personal bliss. Aside from amassing as much as we can at the expense of anyone stupid enough to get in our way, the meaning of the term is no longer clear. Or perhaps it's too clear. The unenlightened masses in the cheap seats raise their hands. In what way is allowing Africa to be depopulated by AIDS in our, or any nation's, national interest? How do the real costs of cheap gasoline pencil out? Where have the farmers and the butterflies gone? Why is mother's milk toxic? Why do seven year olds in Calcutta polish emerald chips until they go blind? Why do seven year olds in Chicago eat Twinkies for breakfast and carry handguns? At what price does the stock market survive? How much is too much and how much isn't enough? In any world order worthy of the name, wouldn't grinding up the planet and feeding it to hogs constitute serious bad form?

It certainly sneers in the face of enlightened self-interest. We know better; and, knowing better, such behavior should be beneath our contempt. There is a web of life and, corny as it might sound to those with too much money to think they need to care, we're all part of it. All things are, at bottom, one thing. There is no us and them, no thee and me. The teacher from Galilee was right: as we do to the least of life, we do to ourselves. There is no real self-interest involved by imagining our interests are holy or that any true profit can result from getting over on someone. Regardless what the efficiency experts tell us, life's not a treadmill and we're not chosen rodents whose manifest destiny is to run in circles until we collapse under the weight of our appetites. There's only one game in town and its rules disallow the notion of getting ahead; or, for that matter, of falling behind. Being human isn't a business; it's an art whose profit and loss statement is written on our soul. We are no more, and no less, than what we do.

There used to be a gesture, a moral gestalt really. It was popular in the early days of the Cultural Revolution, the one that's filling the streets again. The raised fist was a pure and simple gesture that forged several fronts of righteous fury into a two-word position statement: No More. I'm a little out of the loop these days and don't know if it's back in play. It would be good to think so. When it comes to world order, there are so few sound working principles anymore.

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