

Unified Kvetch Theory

Got a problem? Blame "radical individualism."

By Walter Olson

In case you were wondering against whom the traditionalists' culture war was going to be waged, James Dobson and Gary Bauer are pleased to clarify matters. "STOP AND LISTEN, AMERICA," they demand in their co-signed full-page ad in the May 4 *Weekly Standard*, which plays off the Jonesboro, Arkansas, schoolyard massacre. "Are we surprised at the spectacle of children killing children?...Radical individualism is destroying us!"

That last is not a misprint: Among many of the nation's social conservatives, it's getting to be more like a slogan. "Radical individualism threatens to devour even America's children," says Diane Knippers, president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, in a piece written before the shooting sprees. Watergate veteran Charles Colson, now a preacher who's described present-day America as groaning under an "amoral libertarian regime," warns against getting "suckered in by the radical individualism of American culture."

True, some found it a stretch for Dobson and Bauer to blame this year's string of schoolyard murders on an excess of radical individualism (with its reputedly related -isms of secularism and skepticism). Jonesboro, after all, had not exactly been famed as a hotbed of Rand-quoting individualist radicals, or even latte-drinking freethinkers. Like Pearl, Mississippi, and West Paducah, Kentucky, other towns hit with schoolyard killings, Jonesboro is located both physically and temperamentally in the Bible Belt. (Springfield, Oregon, and Edinboro, Pennsylvania, scenes of other shootings, were likewise no one's idea of stamping grounds for the secular elite.) Still, like Eleanor Roosevelt in her heyday, the nation's trades seemed determined to shift the blame for crime away from individual sociopaths and onto the social and cultural environment said to have shaped their psyches—a trend not

dampened even by a rampage carried out by a Swiss Guard in Vatican City.

It's not happenstance that as terms such as *individualist*, *libertarian*, *choice*, and *autonomy* turn into epithets of abuse in many traditionalist circles, many of these same circles are turning a friendlier ear to proposals for state intervention in the economy. Pat Buchanan, of course, has long since departed the free market reservation. Gary Bauer made headlines by deriding the "free-trade mantra," rhetorically assailing Wall Street and big business, playing footsie with unions in their efforts to curtail U.S. firms' use of low-wage labor abroad, and, perhaps most damaging in practice, blasting reformers' plans to privatize Social Security. In *Commentary*, William Bennett and John DiIulio call for making peace with big government, while in *The Wall Street Journal* Bennett deplores the "idolatry of the market" and complains that the options offered by "unbridled capitalism" are the enemy of "values and human relationships." ("Well, yes," replied syndicated columnist Steve Chapman. "They're the enemy of authoritarian values and coercive relationships.")

"Over the past five or six years," as David Frum has summed it up, "social and religious conservatives have taken gleeful pleasure in an increasingly emphatic rejection of free markets and limited government." This is very newsworthy in one sense, but in another it's also unsurprising. What did we expect would happen? How long was fascination with individualist economics supposed to last in a movement shaped on a deeper philosophical level by scorn for individual self-interest and for the individual capacity for reason and self-government? How secure are property rights likely to be in a movement whose rhetoric so often deprecates the very concept of rights, as opposed to seeking to distinguish genuine from spuriously asserted rights, and to

uphold the former with vigor?

The influential religious-traditionalist magazine *First Things* generally maintains a studied silence about matters economic, except for the important task of diminishing the importance of those matters in the wider scheme of things. But its wider philosophic stance is unmistakable. Editor Richard John Neuhaus writes with scorn of the "notion of the unburdened, unencumbered, autonomous self," while a January 1998 book review offers a notably unsympathetic account of the liberal ideal of "autonomy—the idea that the imperial self is to be the sole arbiter of its destiny.... But why should the increase of autonomy lead to the diminishment of evil, as liberals claim? It would only do so were we to understand human nature, in the manner of Rousseau, to be intrinsically good [whereas experience teaches that it's a mix of good and evil]. To increase human autonomy is therefore to increase the human capacity for evil; to rein in evil might require reining in human autonomy."

What, I keep wondering, would traditionalist polemicists do without Rousseau as a scarecrow? In 25 years of acquaintance with classical liberals and modern libertarians, I've yet to meet one who asserted the perfectability of human nature or viewed children as inherently good until corrupted by contact with society. (Indeed, it's Dobson and Bauer who seem implicitly to be assuming the latter. Else, why not admit, in discussing the school shootings, that some kids seem to grow up evil no matter how benign their environment?) Most classical liberals invoke the corruptibility of human nature precisely as a reason not to entrust some persons with coercive power over others. But apparently we're not meant to turn around the reviewer's last sentence so that it reads: "To increase the human power to coerce others is therefore to increase the human capacity for evil; to rein in evil might require reining in the extent to which people can coerce others."

After a while, this literature all begins to blur together: the funhouse caricatures of supposed libertarian precepts-cum-character flaws ("atomism," materialism,

“moral relativism,” hedonism—the first two perhaps characteristic of some but not other libertarians’ views, the latter two absurd as applied to the great majority); the relentless use of loaded terminology, with “gratification” and “self-actualization” the favored new pejoratives for happiness or self-betterment when pursued along unapproved lines, and “expressive individualism” the preferred sly trivialization of the ambition to shape one’s own life rather than accept a hand dealt by others—as if the chance to choose where one lives or who one marries, the wish to live in a society with open horizons rather than one of conscription and regimentation, were on the same level with the taking up of finger-painting as a lark—self-expression, you know.

Then there’s the tendency to conflate libertarianism with other viewpoints and social phenomena whose only apparent common theme is that traditionalist commentators dislike them too. Thus the libertarian impulse is seen as somehow an outgrowth of ’60s liberationism (tell that to Rand or Hazlitt or Hayek), which is connected to changes in sex roles, which is really part of the same trend as Darwinism and undue confidence in science, which of course has a lot to do with disrespect for religion in the public square, and so on. Thus a wide variety of odiums rub off mutually, some of which, like “economism” and “hedonism,” might otherwise be thought unlikely to coexist in a single culprit. But the cue, it seems, is taken from the description of heaven in the old hymn, “There’ll Be No Distinction There.”

On a practical level, as some on the other side well realize, the issue keeps getting back to coercion. “What would the response be from an ACLU lawyer [to your censorship proposals]?” asked Michael Cromartie of Robert Bork in an interview published last year in *Christianity Today*. Replied Bork, “You are inhibiting my liberty and my right to express myself.” And the answer to that is yes, that is precisely what we are after.” Well, we can’t say we weren’t warned.

In her book *The Divorce Culture*, soft-communitarian Barbara Dafoe Whitehead calls for “a vision of the obligated self, voluntarily bound to a set of roles, duties, and responsibilities and of a nation where

sacrifice for the next generation guides adult ambitions and purposes.” Reasonably innocuous, you might think—and in fact entirely too innocuous for Anne Roche Muggeridge, who, reviewing the book for *The Wall Street Journal*, upbraided Whitehead precisely for her concession to the concept of voluntariness. “The very phrase ‘obligated self,’” declared Muggeridge, “breathes contradiction when it lies outside a tradition—and a legal order—that imposes duties on us. (How can we be ‘voluntarily bound’ to anything?)”

Start with the premise that coercion is a positive moral good, and it’s unlikely your eventual favorite policy book is going to turn out to be Milton and Rose Friedman’s *Free to Choose*. And so the logic of individualism-loathing keeps naturally

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beckoning trades into closer cooperation with figures to their left. It might start with a polite hearing for a centrist like Glenn Loury, who writes in *The New Republic* that “religious traditionalists rightly decry” such cultural problems as “radical individualism, moral relativism, and materialism.” Before long one has moved on to stronger stuff, such as the key communitarian text *Habits of the Heart*, by veteran left-labor academic Robert Bellah, et al. Free market opponent Robert Kuttner has picked up the patois like a native. Calling America “a social desert of radical individualism, whose credo might as well be ‘everyone for himself,’” Kuttner calls for “oases of broader values,” by which he really means a revival of labor unions.

Which still leaves the tantalizing question for traditionalist thinkers: Is there some underlying, systemic problem afoot in the world of which all the little surface problems—from contraception to economism, from medical marijuana to the abolition of compulsory chapel at univer-

sities, from MTV to Darwinism, from modern art to the existence of this magazine—are really just different manifestations? The search for a Unified Kvetch Theory took a detour when one or two well-known writers suggested that the common theme among all the different manifestations of modernism was that they were all *antinomian*, which sent everyone scurrying to their dictionaries.

Historically, the term applied to various religious enthusiasts who believed ordinary precepts of morality no longer applied to persons like themselves who were carrying out God’s aims. (David Hume on Puritan-era factions: “The Antinomians even insisted that the obligations of morality and natural law were suspended, and that the elect, guided by an internal principle more perfect and divine, were superior to the beggarly elements of justice and humanity.”) Very freely translated in recent conservative writings, the term refers to the supposed tendency of moderns to believe that if your social-political views are advanced enough, you’re entitled to whatever you feel like without reproach—an easy position to attack, the sole inconvenience being that remarkably few people actually hold it. Disagreeing with biblical-literalist notions of morality does not an antinomian make.

“Antinomianism” didn’t catch on as an all-purpose explainer, but now, as we see, “radical individualism” is pulling up fast on the outside. At least most of the population has some inkling as to what it means, if not a very clear one (which may be the point). It saves the debate from having to rest, at least yet, on explicitly theological grounds. And it can be pressed into service to explain almost anything. People are always—the nerve of them—doing something different from what we have instructed them to do; and every time they disobey they have subordinated their real duty, which we have pointed out to them, to their selfish desire to have their own way.

There’s too much human liberty in the world—for all those other people, that is. Yes, it’s a theory with real potential. ♦

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Packing Heat

By Daniel D. Polsby

More Guns, Less Crime: Understanding Crime and Gun Control Laws, by John R. Lott Jr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 225 pages, \$23.00

About half the U.S. population lives in one of the 31 states with relatively permissive laws regulating who may carry a concealed firearm. These states range from northern New England (Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont) to the deep South (Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida), the Piedmont (Virginia, North Carolina) to the Southwest (Oklahoma, Texas), the upper Midwest (the Dakotas) to the Pacific Northwest (Washington). They include urban states (Pennsylvania), suburban states (Connecticut), rural states (West Virginia and Montana), and everything in between. The other half of America's people live in jurisdictions like New York, where access to concealed-carry permits is limited to those who can demonstrate a specific need for potentially deadly self-protection, or Illinois, where no one other than peace officers may carry a gun.

A massive natural experiment is thus under way, one that will ultimately tell us

to look as though, when a state authorizes private persons to carry handguns, it takes an important step toward suppressing serious crime.

What is at issue in gun control debates is people's (mostly untutored) intuitions about which of two conflicting theories of human behavior has the upper hand in the real world. The first of these theories, sometimes called the "instrumentality theory" of lethal outcomes, holds that when firearms are more readily available, offenses such as armed robbery and murder—and impulsive homicides especially—should increase because guns make it easier to commit crimes.

The opposite theory is that of "general deterrence," which can be summed up in one phrase: more guns, less crime. That, not coincidentally, is the title of an important new book by one of America's most resourceful and fearless econometricians, John Lott, who for the last several years has been the John M. Olin Visiting Fellow in

soldiers, and Secret Service agents carry guns. We recognize that if they did not, their ability to deter predators would shrink or, in some cases, altogether disappear. To know what firearms policy to pursue, one has to know which of these tendencies dominates the other. Like so many other questions with a seemingly ideological leading edge, this one, at bottom, turns out to be empirical.

For many years the public debate about which theory to credit was carried out either by a priori reasoning or, worse, through weak and often tendentious small-scale studies, many of them sponsored by openly results-oriented grantors at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Almost all of these studies, if one may call them that, affirmed that guns were a "public health" hazard that was spreading by leaps and bounds, the outstanding "risk factor" for suicide and murder. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, in particular, has specialized in publishing such regrettable stuff, commonly complementing it with overwrought editorials calling upon Americans for God's sake at last to surrender their guns.

The instrumentality theory enjoys something of a monopoly among the news media and is a veritable litmus test for membership in Washington's intellectual establishment. One might as well believe in flying saucers as doubt the proposition that schoolyard massacres are "caused" by America's sick love affair with the gun. Congressional Democrats (to say nothing of the executive branch) are close to unanimous on this; but Republicans—of the sort who long to be labeled "sensible" or "pragmatic" in newspaper editorials, from Richard Nixon to George Bush—think so too. Practically every gun control initiative of the last 30 years, including the Brady Act and the 1994 "assault weapons" ban, has been based on the premise that restricting the supply of firearms and thereby raising their price should reduce violent crime rates.

Every bit of this, we now know, has been wrongheaded and perverse. Since 1977, the U.S. Department of Justice has

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whether liberal gun carrying laws are good or bad policy. The early results are striking. It can no longer be seriously argued that relaxing the rules against concealed carrying of handguns is an invitation to violence, to bloody shootouts over fender-benders or football games. That sort of thing, always rare, is essentially absent from crime statistics, no matter what a state's rules concerning who may carry a gun in public. What's more, it is beginning

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Each of these theories captures a certain amount of reality. We know, for example, that x number of impulsive homicides would not occur in a gun-free world. On the other hand, we also know that the prospect of meeting armed resistance changes the calculations of human actors, whether they intend good or mischief. That is why we insist that Brinks guards,