

Mythos, Logos and the Politics of Justice

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Abstract

United States Politics and Social Justice are forms that a mythology assumes in a culture. The former has lost sight of its earlier sustaining mythos: an image of Paradise. It has also become unconscious of the earlier writings of Plato and Aristotle on the nature and structure of a virtuous society ruled by leaders of wisdom. By revisioning earlier epistemologies outlined by the ancient Greek philosophers, politics and social justice movements can reclaim their origins. The conclusion outlines a series of 13 differentiations between U.S. politics and the currents of social justice.

For men are easily spoiled; not everyone can bear prosperity....Especially should the laws provide against anyone having too much power derived from friends or from money; if he has, he and his followers should be sent out of the country (Aristotle, Politics, n.d. Book V, chapter 8, p. 361).

Shadowy Soft Spots

The immediate danger confronting one who wishes to reflect on the political landscape of American governance and its relation to or lack of social justice is to begin by entertaining them in too literal a manner. Rather than a rush to literalize the terms, one might pose an earlier question: what is the mythology that drives the engines of American politics? The same might be asked of social justice. For behind both impulses are theories, and imbedded in theories are mythologies, which I understand as governing patterns of values, even energy fields of understanding, that rest invisibly as force fields that influence what is visible. Not tapping this deeper sensibility leaves us susceptible to the virus of literalism which freezes these organic entities into rigid mind sets, stiff opinions, or even self-righteous beliefs. Our politics are our theories, and our theories express underlying mythologies that govern them, often unconsciously. In fact, the less one accepts the reality of the individual and world psyche, the more powerful are the forces of theory as myth. Their intrinsic and innate power resides in their abilities to undo us in our conceptual impulses.

Moreover, our sense of social justice rests often on invisible edifices of epistemology. To express it another way, our ways of knowing—the *episteme* that directs them—are deeply connected to the mythos that gives them form and structure. Joseph Campbell, perhaps more than any other writer of the modern era, introduced mythology back into the cultural conversation as a respectable mode of inquiry. In an early section of *Thou Art*

That (2001) entitled “What Myths Do,” he claims multiple functions of any people’s mythology. They are worth noting here at the outset:

The first function of mythology is to arouse in the mind a sense of awe...through one of three ways of participating in it: by moving out, moving in, or effecting a correction....The second function of a traditional mythology is interpretive, to present a consistent image of the order of the cosmos....The third function of a traditional mythology is to validate and support a specific moral order, that order of the society out of which that mythology arose....The fourth function of traditional mythology is to carry the individual through the various stages and crises of life—that is, to help persons grasp the unfolding of life with integrity (2001, pp. 3-5).

If in this complex discussion of politics and justice the mythos is not addressed on a thoughtful and receptive level, but rather than only on the rancorous level of logos, then expressing that relationship will be always half-baked, but perhaps with yeasty inflation, as it emerges prematurely out of the social oven.

An even earlier question that I would pose would be: What is a just society? What does it look like? What are its governing images, its self-correcting myths as well as its shadowy underbelly? And even earlier: is there an impulse in the soul that hungers for justice and virtue? Who is allowed to participate in such a world with a voice that will be heard? There is no way around it: politics and justice are psychological tendencies in the soul, even mythological dispositions, because they carry into the minds of individuals and the collective large fantasies of right and wrong. Further, what are the shadows that American politics and even tendencies to social justice carry? For if we ignore the shadowy images that are just below the surface of both politics and justice, we run the risk of exchanging one set of fantasies for another, one blueprint for change for another such that both end by leaving us right where we are. I mention at the close of this paragraph that I have consciously avoided the more traditional “How” and “Why” questions: How because then I am thrown into technique; Why because I am then caught in cause-effect relations that foreclose on exploring these gnarly and knotty dimensions of the common good.

The poet, playwright and political leader of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel, has written elegantly of the world’s drama. His poetic sense aided, not distracted, from his power as humane leader. In December, 1955, at the site of Hiroshima during an international conference on hope, he addressed the audience with this insight:

The only thing that can explain the existence of genuine hope is humanity’s profound and essentially archetypal certainty—though denied or unrecognized a hundred times over—that our life on this earth is not just a random event...but that it is an integral component or link, however miniscule, in the great and mysterious order of Being, an order in which everything has a place of its own...and given its proper and permanent value (1998, p. 239).

Our theories and our policies, as Havel's insights informs us, are surface ripples of a deeper mythology that shapes and forms them. Yet the mythos of politics or the psychic fields created by them churn under the floorboards but are often not given ample voice. So let's ask the question another way: what is the imagination of American Politics? What images in the collective psyche propels impulses towards social justice? Both are acts of imagination, not just reasoned tracks of thought and action. I admit that I have certainly not read all of *The 9/11 Commission Report: Authorized Edition*. But one conclusion reached by those who composed it struck me regarding the present topic. Chapter 11, "Foresight—And Hindsight," included these words: "We believe the 9/11 attacks revealed four kinds of failures: in imagination, policy, capabilities, and management" (N. d., p.339). This discovery must be taken seriously; it is one of the startling admissions in the *Report* as far as I have read because it lifts the discussion out of simply and narrowly discursive reason as well as the anemic language that attends it and places it instead in the realm of psyche and imagination. Is there an implication here that perhaps not just American politics but social justice as well must be reimagined and then languaged differently?

Animating a Cliché

When I hear the term "social justice," I think of fair wages, clean water, one's ability to advance in his/her work, muted control on one's everyday life, the right to worship as one believes, a general sense of fair play in the spirit of a golden mean, a specter of freedom in thought, speech and actions, a fair or at least adequate distribution of wealth. But these are the trappings of the visible realm that can easily occlude or disbar from conversation the soul of things, the animating principles that, while invisible, are no less tangible realities if our epistemology is courageous enough to expand so to include them. So what about a conversation that includes the mythos of the polis or its epistemology—what are its tenets and tenants of knowing--that guide a political party, regime, candidate, or nation? Let it also include the connection between politics and Eros: where is the juice and what is its flow through a political debate? Where does the adequacy of a political regime or the sense of social justice draw its lines of limitations? Is either caught in an obsessive mode of thought that then disallows it to spread out beyond its own narcissism or narrowly defined causative sense of itself?

I bring this language in here to challenge a dangerous tendency in current American debates: so much of the language is impoverished, especially in its tendency to make individual lives and their vicissitudes into "Issues," a word that has come to flatten out the realities of persons' lives into abstractions by objectifying and thereby distancing self from any significant conversation that could actually change something. With "Issues," everything is modified to this sterile noun; all is made adjectival and thus subordinate to the soft, even gooey word: "Issues." If the discussion is to retrieve any imaginal energy, we must pay closer attention to the language used in the debates.

And speaking of language: the subject matter of this volume is "United States Politics and Social Justice." Would that these two large terms could actually respect that coordinate conjunction that both separates and binds them, respect the tension between

them and simultaneously notice their confluence. I think language, vocabulary, metaphor, symbol, used in current debates is anemic, bereft, narrow, shrunken, shriveled, and finally inadequate for today's complexities, just as the sound byte is so pathetic in trying to carry nuance or subtlety. That, however, is a topic for another volume: *Social Justice and Language*. Consider the language of today's campaigns: *national safety, security, resolute, stay the course, get the job done, the American people want..., change, new direction, cut-and-run, no yielding, courage, bravery*. The language of obfuscation, while having the 10 second force of a sound-byte, actually inhibits, to my mind, any penetration of the particulars of reality that this vocabulary ostensibly refers to and conjures up in the mind. Quite the opposite: this vocabulary works to increase the kind of "psychic numbing" that the social critic Robert J. Lifton has characterized as the bane of the American mind.

One more idea before we shift to American mythology. Missing far too often in the current discussions is not just imagination, which could allow for a poetics of debate, but a philosophic basis as well. The prevailing fantasy as I see it is that one must follow the lead of the media's structure, which then becomes the dominant frame for the debate. This is a dangerous reversal of how public discussion should work. So, I therefore sense a desperate capitulation to the status of a national Attention Deficit Disorder driving the current debate of a faulty democracy. Not a good place to be. It is just a hair's breath away from Tyranny. I could launch right here into the ways studying the Humanities might make for a more discerning citizenry, but will refrain.

Let's add as well another category: Politics and the Sacred. The language of "separation of church and state" has been torqued grotesquely into a weapon by several factions, with devastating results. Not church but the sacred quality of citizenship would muster another range of topics. We might also return to beginnings of the political idea that animates the Western psyche, not simply continue to limp along with the same crippled rhetoric, the same sclerotic prose and the worn out, desperate clichés mentioned above, that substitute for thoughtful exchange. Therefore, to the terms of the current debate I wish to sign a form on the clipboard of the exhausted patient: "Do Not Resuscitate." Let the patient die, etherized on the table. The patient is language, clichés, catch phrases and slogans; the language in the discussion on both sides is exhausted and in need of a complete death or a massive transfusion of new bloody words to enliven, even quicken, the discourse. Perhaps nothing short of a new heart will do. I have this image of someone who, in the aftermath of a hurricane, where the house has been torn apart, the individual desperately hammers a few new shingles on the rubble roof, hoping to shore up its ruined grandeur.

Let me turn now to one of the prevailing myths that, while a bit tarnished and showing signs of fatigue, nonetheless governs the American psyche today.

America's Sustaining Mythos

One myth that governs this relationship has been expressed by many writers, one of whom most notably is the Cistercian monk and political activist Thomas Merton. Early in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1968/1989, p. 34), he locates the central myth of

America as a reformatting of “the earthly paradise.” As a new land, it suffers no memory, no history, no residue or taint of the past: “The New-Found-Land was a world without *history*, therefore without sin, therefore a paradise” (p. 34). It was thus a land that promised the suffering of Europe a fresh start in a wilderness of milk and honey “with one’s hand in the hand of God...!” (p. 34).

With no deep memory to guide it, and with its temptation to erase the tribal memories of the new land [a version of the serpent in the primordial Garden (p.35)], America’s compass was already set in shaky air. The image or myth of the frontier continued her journey of innocence. Repeated successes further ingrained such a stance and disposition. Merton’s reading is that success covered a multitude of sins and essentially allowed injustices to be leveled on America’s own people and on others “outside the myth” such that the politics of America split from a full sense of justice for all.

Not until the Civil War did America fall into original sin, when the nation split over whether a people exported and exploited by capitalism were to be free or enslaved as part of the machinery of prosperity. I would call the Civil War the great mythic divide between innocence and guilt, a chasm between politics and justice; we have not fully recovered from that deep national wound, which seems to be perpetuated in subsequent conflicts we find ourselves in, often wrapped in a faulty and threadbare security blanket of a too-literal idea of freedom. Here we can learn something about the nature of a mythology. The myth that a people chooses for itself as guide, or a myth that is foisted on them, directs their values, their beliefs, their prejudices, what they choose to remember and, perhaps more critically, what they choose to forget. It also sets the perimeters of the conversation and frames the debate in a narrow lexicon. In my own thought, what separates American politics from the arena of social justice rests primarily on what we as a nation choose to remember and what we struggle to forget.

Recollecting the Origin of an Idea

So let us remember and then recover for a moment some ideas about justice that defined the early contours of the Western mythos, into which America enters as a late participant. The early western philosophers Plato and Aristotle wrote extensively about the nature of justice, virtue, falsehood, leadership and the quality of life possible in the polis. For both of them, for various reasons, these qualities were bedrock for a democratic state to flourish.

In Book I of the *Republic*, Socrates is enjoying a conversation with a Greek citizen, Thrasymachus; on the connection between justice and wisdom, and the sad consequences when they part company.

Socrates: “For factions, Thrasymachus, are the outcome of injustice and hatreds and internecine conflicts, but justice brings oneness of mind and love. It is not so?” Thrasymachus readily assents, as Socrates continues:

“If it is the business of injustice to engender hatred wherever it is found, will it not, when it springs up either among free men or slaves, cause them to hate and be at strife with one another, and make them incapable of effective action in common?”

To which his partner replies: “By all means.”

Socrates then pushes the force of injustice one step further:

“And is it not apparent that its force is such that wherever it is found in city, family, camp, or in anything else, it first renders the thing incapable of co-operation with itself owing to faction and difference...?” (p. 602).

Socrates reveals in this ancient text the marriage between politics and justice and their destructive tendencies when injustice rules the individual, the family or the city.

Later, in the *Laws*, he uses the metaphor of “a polity,” which “is like a ship or a living organism” (p.1491) and its health rests on the justice inherent in the character of its leaders:

“For if the censors who are to approve our magistrates are better men themselves, and do their work with flawless and irreproachable justice, then there will be prosperity and true happiness for the whole of nation and society, but if aught is amiss with the auditing of our magistrates, then the bonds of right which hold all branches of our social fabric together in one will be loosened;...”(p.1491).

I return a last time to the *Republic* for a final insight by Socrates in his deepening discussion with Thrasymachus, wherein the former addresses the soul’s work:

“The soul, has it a work which you could accomplish with anything else in the world, as for example, management, rule, deliberation, and the like? Is there anything else than soul to which you could rightly assign these and say that they were its peculiar work?” to which his agreeable partner responds: “Nothing else.” (p. 604)

Socrates then questions the soul’s relation to virtue: “Will the soul ever accomplish its own work well if deprived of its own virtue, or is this impossible?... . And did we not agree that the excellence or virtue of soul is justice and defect injustice?” (604).

The point of his strategy is to reveal that no matter how one slices the nature of justice, the just soul is happy, lives well, is virtuous and participates in excellence (604). My reading of these passages suggests that politics and social justice have no “and” between them; they are one and the same force in the polis and in the soul of the citizen.

Would that these memories of Socrates’ discussions could find their way into the halls of Washington and to the state capitals to renew and revision the inextinguishable power of leadership and citizenship in a democracy.

Following Plato, yet pushing the discussion further, Aristotle reveals, first in Book IV of the *Politics*, the valued place of a democracy in promoting justice, social or otherwise: “Therefore we should rather say that democracy is a form of government in which the free are rulers, and oligarchy one in which the rich rule. It is only an accident that the free are the many and the rich are the few” (p. 325).

A few pages later, he elaborates the various faces a democracy may assume: “Of the forms of democracy, first comes that which is said to be based strictly on equality. In such a democracy, the law calls it justice that the poor should have no more power than

the rich, and that neither should be masters, but both equal. For if liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are the chief characteristics of democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost” (p. 328).

The danger of forms of oligarchy, by contrast, are that they exclude the poor: “the property qualification for any office is so high that the poor, although they form the majority, have no share in government. While it does not necessarily follow, there is a tendency of an oligarchy to furnish fertile breeding ground for a tyrant to attain absolute power. In Book V of the *Laws*, Aristotle sums up the behavior of a tyrant: (1) the humiliation of his subjects, for he knows that a mean-spirited man will not conspire against anybody; (2) the creation of mutual mistrust among them, for a tyrant is not overthrown until men begin to have confidence in one another. This is why tyrants make war on the good;...; and (3) the tyrant desires to keep his subjects incapable of action, for no one attempts what is impossible, and they will not attempt to overthrow their tyranny, if they are powerless. (p. 373).

By contrast, in Book VI he begins chapter 2 with an assertion that “the basis of a democratic state is liberty, which, according to the common opinion of men, can be enjoyed only in such a state. This they affirm to be the great end of every democracy” (379). Two qualities that accompany such a state, which I will not pursue but only mention, are education and leisure (pp. 406, 413).

Both Plato and Aristotle carry strong fantasies of what constitutes a virtuous person and, by extension, a city or society that mirrors such an individual’s vitality. What both reveal as well is the intricate relationship between individual, social structure, ethos of place, as well as education’s seminal role in creating a politically fair and socially just atmosphere, in which every citizen may breathe freely the air of opportunity.

Contemporary Variations

I end this aspect of the discussion with a more contemporary voice. Avishai Margalit, Professor of Philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem’s most recent book is *The Ethics of Memory* (2005), a superb account of what a society chooses to remember and to forget and from which I have drawn in this essay. But an earlier study is more poignant for this essay: *The Decent Society* (1996). In it he exposes how a decent society, to put it simply here, is one whose institutions do not humiliate people. His insight is profound in its simplicity. He furthers his discussion by comparing a decent society to a civilized one. The latter “is a microethical concept concerned with the relationships between individuals, while the idea of a decent society is a macroethical concept concerned with the setup of the society as a whole” (p.2). Self-respect, not self-esteem, is the appropriate goal of honor, he claims, because “self respect is independent of any action or omission by other people toward one...” (p. 11).

It seems to me that a politically healthy philosophy allows for the conjunction “and” that resides between politics—American or otherwise—and social justice. Not versus or “as opposed to,” but “and.” A real quantum leap would be to reach a point where the “and” is no longer needed, where it seeks effacement, wherein a political philosophy and

a vital sense of justice fold into one another. Merton is helpful here as he addresses in “Christianity and Totalitarianism” the tendency to confuse faith and prejudice:

Faith and prejudice have a common need to rely on authority and in this they can sometimes be confused by one who does not understand their true nature. But faith rests on the authority of love while prejudice rests on the pseudo-authority of hatred (*Disputed Questions*, 1959/1988 p.132).

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Paradox

I end this brief discussion with a series of counterpoints between U.S. Politics and Social Justice as I understand these massive terms, both in their lived reality and in their ideal condition:

1. United States politics appears increasingly acerbic and feeds on a single diet of competition and sinister complicity. Social justice bends more toward cooperation and compromise.
2. U.S. politics is more narcissistic and self-aggrandizing. Social justice tends toward an authentic generosity of spirit.
3. U.S. politics seems to delight in waste and fiscal and philosophical incontinence. Its mainstay diet is a bloated budget. Social justice must tend towards thrift and gift.
4. U.S. politics allows a free play of lobbying for selfish ends, graft, nepotism. Social justice is based on a form of gifting, of giving, in a largesse of spirit.
5. U.S. politics seems bent on self-serving and protecting its own fantasies that protect and preserve its wounded condition. Social justice is based on a selfless yielding to the needs of others without an agenda-driven selfishness.
6. U.S. politics rests on forgetting and ignoring the past, compelled rather to forge always the new, the novel, which appears as it unfolds as more of the safe and familiar. Social justice is based on remembrance, recollection, and retrieval of a good that allows the greatest number to benefit.
7. U.S. politics has as its foundation a general absence of courage and an inordinate amount of fear of loss of position and security. Social justice rests on courageous and expansive consciousness.
8. U.S. politics appears pockmarked by scandals that demean the spirit of democracy’s nobility as outlined initially by early Greek philosophy. Social justice revisions a sacred quality of being and values the whole within which the individual participates to the extent of one’s talents and capacities.
9. U.S. politics struggles to exclude and to protect the insider. Social justice wrestles to in-corporate inclusively.
10. U.S. politics carries within it a pseudo-epic but authentic tragic cast. Social justice is inspired by an authentic epic and comic cast.

11. U.S. politics has become enslaved as a lowly servant to the myth of capitalism, to which it has capitulated. Social justice must bring capitalistic impulses to serve its goals.
12. U.S. politics feeds on bi-partisan acrimony and fragmentation. Social justice strives to unify, coalesce, and integrate the noblest qualities of the human soul.
13. U.S. politics is enamored of a gilded age, a surface glow. Social justice struggles to recollect and make present a golden age.

While each cultural artifact--politics and justice--carries a shadow of itself and must therefore be vigilant of its own destructive tendencies, each deploys as well a nobility of soul that has been deleted from the current restricted conversation. A stingy and narrow way of speaking of both dimensions has crept into the field. The first step to renewing and reinvigorating the qualities of politics and justice is to seek a wider vocabulary, a more vibrant lexicon, fresh metaphors, revived symbols, in which these ideas and ideals may be transformed in a vessel worthy of their existence. The logos of a people is the vessel in which that same people's mythos flourishes or flounders.

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