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President's Comment

Joseph Baldacchino



Whither America—and Why

While attending a recent conference, I was asked at dinner by a fellow participant, "How are things going?"—a reference, it was quickly explained, not to the state of my personal welfare but to the main topic of the gathering, which was the general state of the nation and the world. "Are things getting better or worse?"

"On balance, worse," I unhesitatingly replied, to which he responded: "I would have said just the opposite." My dinner companion cited a string of reasons for his optimism, virtually all of them related to business and finance: the soaring stock market, the taming of inflation, low interest rates, a friendly political climate for business, the triumph of global capitalism in the wake of the Cold War, talk in Washington of reducing the size of government.

The view expressed by my companion is not uncommon, particularly among those who see the world primarily in economic terms. An article published by a Washington policy institute, entitled "The State of Humanity: Steadily Improving," declares: "Almost every absolute change, and the absolute component of almost every economic and social change or trend, points in a positive direction, as long as we view the matter over a reasonably long period of time. That is, all aspects of material human welfare are improving in the aggregate."

The author of this piece, a well respected academic, supports his thesis with a variety of data, including a worldwide increase in life expectancy since the 1950s, greater availability of raw materials, growing food supplies, a cleaner physical environment, and a declining proportion of the population working in agriculture which "has enabled consumption per person to multiply by a factor of 20 or 40." Together, he writes, these "data show unmistakably how the standard of living has increased in the world and in the United States through the recent centuries and decades, right up through the 1980s."

By and large I do not question this author's data. My disagreement—and the source of my greater apprehension about

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NHI Notes . . .

NHI Chairman **Claes G. Ryn**'s book *Will, Imagination and Reason* is out in a Second Edition from Transaction Publishers, with a major new Introduction by the author. Ryn has maintained a heavy speaking schedule. In June, he addressed a conference in Stockholm on preventing genocide sponsored by the Friends of Raoul Wallenberg. In August he lectured at a conference on culture and society, near the city of Växjö, Sweden. Other lectures were at Georgetown University, Regis University, and St. Vincent's College. . . .NHI co-sponsored a lecture at Catholic University by the renowned historian **Forrest McDonald**. McDonald, a member of NHI's Academic Board, is the author of *The American Presidency: An Intellectual History* and many other books. . . . NHI sponsored a panel on "Political Imagination and the Historical Sense" at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. Participants included **David D. Roberts**, chairman of the history department at the University of Georgia, **Randall E. Auxier**, chairman of the philosophy department at Oklahoma City University, and **Michael P. Federici**, assistant professor of political science at Mercyhurst College and director of NHI's Center for Constitutional Studies.

NHI Needs Your Help!

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Mark L. Melcher Elected to NHI Board

Mark L. Melcher, Managing Director and Director of Washington Research at Prudential Securities, has been elected to the Board of Directors of NHI. Melcher, who also serves as the Institute's Treasurer, comments regularly on social, political, and cultural issues for the *Prudential Strategy Weekly*.



MELCHER

The following is excerpted from one of Mark's recent articles:

I would like to make what I consider to be a very important point about the constant

political fights in Washington. To do this, I will lean heavily on the views of my oft-quoted good friend Claes Ryn, who teaches politics at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. Claes believes, and I heartily agree, that the principal battlefield in the war over what kind of nation America will be in the twenty-first century is not Washington.

Washington is one of the spoils of this war, the place where the results of the various skirmishes and engagements are written into the lawbooks. But the real movers are those individuals in society who fashion and influence the way the public thinks

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about things—who “draw us into their way of experiencing the world.” These people, Claes says, are the nation’s artists, authors, entertainers, and advertisers.

Claes explains that an individual’s view of the world is shaped to an enormous degree by the artistic symbols to which he or she is exposed. Some such symbols strengthen character and imagination and, in doing so, promote a keener sense of

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This, Claes says, explains why some people seem to cling so tenaciously to economic and social doctrines that have been discredited time and time again by both experience and theory. This strange behavior isn’t necessarily a function of low intelligence. “In this century alone,” Claes says, “one can point to many individuals of obvious intelligence who have spoken foolishly on some subject. A number of Nobel prize winners come to mind who have combined genius in some field with naiveté in others.” And it certainly isn’t that the practical arguments in their favor are decisive. The explanation lies in the framework from which people view things. And this framework is dictated not by politics, but by art, music, literature, television, movies, and advertising; by the symbols that inspire and shape the public’s imagination and its dreams for the future.

The article in which Claes set forth these thoughts some ten years ago does not offer specific examples of the enormous social, and ultimately political, power of literature and the arts. But they, of course, abound in world history.

Obvious examples include the Old Testament stories of Abraham, Ruth, Esther, Job, Jacob, David, Noah, and, of course, Adam and Eve, which have profoundly shaped the very nature of Western society. Shakespeare and Milton changed the way the world thinks about conflict and love and honor and God. Voltaire and Rousseau can take as much responsibility for the French revolution, which changed the Western world forever, as can the actions of Louis XVI or Marie Antoinette.

In more recent times, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* also comes to mind. It had as much impact on the debate

over slavery, and probably effected resort to war, more than all of the debates in Congress combined. Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle* had enormous impact on the way millions of Americans viewed both the American labor movement and the early liberal agenda. Leon Uris’s *Exodus* affected the attitude of untold Christian Americans toward the new state of Israel.

How many Americans had their patriotism indelibly stamped onto their souls by reading Whittier’s

popular poem, “Barbara Fritchie” (“Shoot, if you must this old gray head,/But spare your country’s flag; she said.”), or Scott’s “Love of Country” (“Breathes there the man with soul so dead/Who never to himself has said: ‘This is my own, my native land’?”)?

How many young girls learned that sexual restraint was noble and good from reading Emily Dickinson’s “The Charm”?

A Charm invests a face
 Imperfectly beheld—
 The Lady dare not lift her Veil
 For fear it be dispelled—
 But peers beyond her mesh—
 And Wishes—and denies—
 Lest Interview—annul a want—
 That image—satisfies—

Or from reading Dickinson’s letters to Otis Lord. “Oh, my too beloved, save me from the idolatry which would crush us both . . . Don’t you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer—don’t you know that ‘no’ is the widest word we consign to Language? The ‘Stile’ is God’s—My Sweet One—for your great sake—not mine—I will not let you cross—but it is all yours, and when it is right I will lift the Bars, and lay you in the Moss. . . It is Anguish I long conceal from you to let you leave me, hungry, but you ask the divine Crust and that would doom the Bread.”

Is it any wonder, then, that those who would deconstruct American society, who hate its Judeo-Christian morality and its centuries old cultural habits and customs, have focused their attack on the traditional literary canon? Just as Wellington noted that the battle of Waterloo was won on the fields of Eton, the battle for the soul of America will ultimately be won in the humanities classes of the nation’s high schools, colleges, and universities.

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the near-term future—stems not so much from the economic evidence posited but from other evidence, both economic and spiritual/ethical, that frequently is overlooked when people think in narrowly economic terms.

The “state of humanity steadily improving”? Our “standard of living” at an all-time high? Surely, that depends upon how these terms are defined. In the 1940s, when young women flocked from homes in rural areas into cities like Washington and New York to help with the war effort, they were free for the most part to walk the streets, even late at night, in relative safety. Today, wide swaths of America’s cities—and increasingly its suburbs and rural hamlets as well—are no-man’s lands, where outsiders dare not enter and where residents cower behind locked doors. Dr. Peter Beilenson, the Baltimore health commissioner, estimates that in that city alone there are 55,000 drug addicts, nearly one-tenth of the entire population. The experience of other American cities is similar. With legions of addicts supporting expensive habits by preying on the citizenry, personal security, a fundamental right once taken for granted, is increasingly scarce.

The erosion of personal safety did not occur in a vacuum, but was interwoven with other deleterious trends, not least the depreciation of home and family life. In the 1950s one American breadwinner, usually the husband and father, normally was able to support a family financially. Today—thanks in part to proliferating taxes that bite ever more deeply into Americans’ earnings—many families have both mother and father in the workplace and still barely can pay routine and necessary bills, much less make provision for future responsibilities. In other cases, not financial necessity but waxing materialism has provided the impetus for the prominence of the two-earner family. Either way, the effects are costly, as parents have inadequate time for their children or themselves. As the great philosophers knew, leisure is indispensable to the good life—for reasons that transcend mere physical and mental relaxation.

The displacement of women’s historic role has damaged not only the family but society-at-large. When wives typically were

at home, their activities were not confined to servile labor. While husbands were earning a paycheck, wives had the opportunity, among other activities, to visit in one another’s homes and to do the collective work of those intermediate institutions that bridge the gap between the isolated individual and the state. In great measure it was through the groundwork thus laid by women that men were integrated into the community that lies beyond the home and formal place of business.

The losses stemming from the reduction of women’s central civilizing role may not be reflected in official standard-of-living statistics, but that does not make those losses less profound. Today—when life for many men and women and children consists of little more than work or school, commuting, and a meal or two on the run, with weekends devoted to necessary catch-up on housework and shopping—many Americans do not even know the names of their neighbors. And mark this: When neighbors do not know one another, in the deepest sense there are no neighbors.

From the depreciation of family and neighborly relations there follows, as Burke warned, the dissipation of all those qualities which raise life above mere survival and infuse it with elegance, dignity, and high purpose. This is not surprising, since a love for ends that transcend narrow selfishness is learned, first of all, in the family and the neighborhood. The destruction of what Burke called “the unbought grace of life” may not be incorporated in the positivists’ quantitative models, but it can be seen—and heard—in the real world every day. In our routine lives we both perpetrate and suffer a coarseness of dress, speech, and manners that would have shocked our parents’ or grandparents’ generations. In our cultural lives we celebrate banality and worship celebrity. In our political lives we blithely obey and sustain with our taxes a government that violates its constitutional charter with impunity.

The bulls may be jostling each other on Wall Street, but, as the renowned economist Wilhelm Röpke, architect of the post-World War II German “economic miracle,” emphasized in his 1958 book *A Humane Economy: The Social Framework of the Free Market*:

Individuals who compete on the market and there pursue their own advantage stand all the more in need of the social and moral bonds of community, without which competition degenerates most grievously. . . . the market economy . . . must find its place

in a higher order of things . . . It must be firmly contained within an all-embracing order of society in which the imperfections and harshness of economic freedom are corrected by law and in which man is not denied conditions of life appropriate to his nature. Man can wholly fulfill his nature only by freely becoming part of a community and having a sense of solidarity with it. Otherwise he leads a miserable existence and he knows it.

The economy may be in good shape for the moment, but American society is sinking into the mire. The important question is how to arrest society’s slide and, indeed, to set it once again on the ascendant path. The answer is to be found in the “all-embracing order” mentioned by Röpke. That order is based on restraint, but restraint from what source? Because men and women are torn between higher and lower inclinations, we cannot always depend on people to do what is right or moral simply *because* it is right or moral. That is why all societies establish external rewards and penalties—laws, rules, incentives, disincentives—that encourage proper behavior and discourage its opposite even when men and women are not acting out of the highest motives. But external rewards and restraints—the promise of advancement and threat of punishment, which appeal to men’s narrow self-interest, however enlightened—cannot alone sustain the good society.

There also must be present to some degree another form of restraint that comes from within the individual and whose source is morality itself—the higher will, or conscience, which seeks what is good for its own sake because to do less would result in a loss of meaning and worth. It is this authority, felt strongly within, that connects the individual to a higher reality.

Real morality is not easy. It takes constant effort, and its main object is improvement of the inner man or woman. What is important to the man of character, writes Irving Babbitt (1861-1933), “is not his power to act on the world, but his power to act on himself.” This idea, typical of classical Greek and Roman civilization and of medieval Christendom, has been under assault in the modern world. Though traditional conceptions of virtue have not been entirely driven from the field, morality and ethics have become identified increasingly with progressive humanitarianism, whose

main professed concern* is easing the collective lot of mankind.

Babbitt identified two strains of humanitarianism. One, which he termed Rousseauism after Jean-Jacques Rousseau, holds that men and women naturally have sentimental feelings toward others so that if individuals give free vent to their natural impulses the world will be a better place. If corruption is evident, according to this view, the fault—and the need for change—must lie not in the conduct of individual men and women but in social and political institutions. The second strain of humanitarianism, which Babbitt called Baconianism after Francis Bacon, sees economics, science, and technology as the keys to a better future for all.

It may seem at first glance that no two kinds of individual could be further apart than the “bleeding-heart” Rousseauist and the “hard-headed” Baconian. Yet on the most essential point—the placing of the primary locus of moral struggle outside the individual—the two are as one, and it is not uncommon to see tendencies characteristic of each type coexisting in the same persons. For purposes of concrete illustration the current occupants of the White House spring readily to mind. Both the President and the First Lady pride themselves on their sympathetic feel-

*The professed concern often veils less honorable motives. In Babbitt's words, “If we attend to the psychology of the persons who manifest such an eagerness to serve us, we shall find that they are even more eager to control us” (*Democracy and Leadership* [Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979 (1924)], 314).

ings for the underdog. Bill Clinton became famous early for the phrase “I feel your pain.” By identifying his own cause with that of “the little guy” and his opponents with the interests of the undeserving rich, Clinton dealt the Republicans a thrashing in the fall 1995 budget showdown from which they have yet to recover. Mrs. Clinton likes to champion groups commonly viewed as “oppressed,” among them the world's women and children, and she frequently speaks of her interest in things “spiritual.” She has endorsed what the socialist editor of *Tikkun* has called “a politics of meaning.” Yet, sentimentalists that they are, the First Couple also view themselves as sharp-minded technocrats, fully equal to the task, if only Congress had let them, of federalizing the nation's health-care system.

When the President was asked at a recent news conference about one of the scandals with which his administration has been associated, he responded, good humanitarian that he is, that the morality that counts could be found in his policies, not his personal character. Public opinion seems to side with the President. His approval ratings stand near record highs despite widespread allegations of wrongdoing. This should come as no surprise, given the growing displacement of the morality of personal restraint by various forms of pseudo-ethics that appeal to Americans on both ends of the political spectrum.

The eclipse of inward morality is deadly. On the one side, it invites political tyranny. As Burke warned two centuries ago, “Society cannot exist unless a controlling power

upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without.” On the other side, the depreciation of personal integrity undermines respect for law, tradition, manners, taste, and general decency, bringing corruption, litigiousness, and incipient anarchy in its train. America is feeling the effects of both tendencies as ways of life long respected are now persecuted, behavior previously scorned is now glorified, and our government, for corruption and intrusiveness, increasingly resembles a cross between a banana republic and the Brezhnev-era Soviet Union.

“Are things getting better or worse?” Let's just say that there is a lot of work to be done.

NHI Needs Your Help!

The NATIONAL HUMANITIES INSTITUTE's programs are making a difference. Our flagship publication, the academic journal *Humanitas*, has become indispensable reading for many in the academic community. Our website (www.nhumanities.org) is used by researchers at major universities and think tanks throughout the world. And our ideas, which were a bit hard to place for many when NHI was founded, are becoming the wave of the future.

But the financial resources available are woefully disproportionate to the task we have undertaken. To continue and expand our work, the Institute *must* broaden its base of support.

If you believe that the work of the Institute is important, please help NHI to whatever extent you can as soon as possible. Contributions are tax-deductible.

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