

HOW ‘YA GONNA KEEP ‘EM DOWN ON THE FARM (After They’ve Seen Paree)

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Abstract: *Change is abroad across the land, as often destructive as constructive. No one is immune. The financial crisis is perhaps the most obvious wave of change, but as the title of this paper (and also the title of a song popular in America between World I and World War II¹) suggests, the most pervasive, seductive, and subversive changes are fueled by the view of the wider world provided by the internet with its blogs and social networks. How ‘ya gonna keep ‘em satisfied with a second-class life (or worse) after they have seen the luxuries and freedoms of the wider world? Knowledge is power, and frightening amounts of people-power can be marshaled via the internet. Tyrants fall and royal families quake in the face of so much focused intentionality. But even as freedoms are recovered, what are all the unemployed to do with that freedom, especially in those countries in which the average age is between late teens and early twenties – kids, really, with no prospects of the good life? Add to this the coming shortage of food, drinking water, and fuel and the resulting upward spiral of costs for life’s necessities, further imposing hardship on new members of ‘the internet generation.’ Social and political catastrophes are to be expected. What can the countries in ‘Europe’s southern neighborhood’ do to respond, to be proactive in the face of massive and predictable changes?*

Keywords: *predictable problems, proactive response, cross-border collaboration, food, fuel riots*

JEL Classification Codes: I0, I1, I3

1. INTRODUCTION

Two princes of the English language, first William Shakespeare in *Richard III*, and American author and Nobel laureate John Steinbeck with his novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, plugged that phrase into the lexicon. We have survived (one hopes) the winter of discontented people across the Middle East, and now we are in the ‘Arab Spring’ that was first announced in 2005 to describe the expected spread of Western-style democracy resulting from the invasion of Iraq. Whatever happens (this is being written in February), some uncomfortable truths will come out of the internet -- that invincible truth machine and source of the Wiki Leaks scandal.

What this means to me, even as a pretty hopeless *technopeasant*, is that we have more knowledge about coming events than ever before, and the question is, What will we do with our fore-knowledge? Will we pretend that the worst will not happen, that there will not be food riots, water riots, gas-price and availability riots this year or not too many years ahead?

Or will we continue to look the other way while people suffer deprivation? Or will we pretend to be surprised when the calamities inconvenience us? Maybe there could be some intelligent collaboration to build strong communities in this neighborhood so far removed from Washington, London, Brussels, and Paris. What do you think?

My guess is that selfishness among the states in this neighborhood will prevent pro-action. Self-interest is not illegal or even immoral, but it is a powerful set of blinders to block out opportunities to share resources for the benefit of people outside our territorial boundaries – and to protect our people from assaults by resentful neighbors.

I learned later that I should have that there are only two forces in our lives, two major headings for all that we do and think. Those two major life themes are *love* and *fear*. It seems that most religious systems counsel us to care for others as ourselves, but we all know that *he who has the gold makes the rules!* And as for fear – which institution do you know that does *not* use fear as an instrument of control and governance? In truth, all of us are programmed – by parents, priests, teachers, deans, and managers by any title – to be fearful of the consequences of wrong steps we might take.

In a way, we all live in the police state of our minds.

2. APPROACHING THE UNDEFINED PROBLEM

An American novelist who emigrated from Russia in 1925 and became an important intellectual icon, Ayn Rand created her Objectivist philosophy and explained it in best-selling novels and a powerful small book of essays published in 1964. The title? *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*². I think she offers some great insights for those of you who will live-out the theme of this conference.

I first read the book at least thirty years ago, and liked it. Back then, I was practically militant in my conservatism. But unlike many people my age, I find that I am becoming more liberal, even more progressive, as I get older. And, surprisingly, Ayn Rand's philosophy still makes sense. On my first long-ago reading, I interpreted her philosophy as saying that "turn the other cheek" doesn't mean willingly suffering abuse – quite opposite from the usual Christian teachings; and it doesn't mean wearing a hair shirt nor does it mean buying into some kind of collective guilt. Altruism – suffering for others or asking others to suffer for you – is a distortion of rational thought and behavior. Having lived through two revolutions before leaving Russia, and experiencing the suppression of individuality in the state's quest for collectivist conformity, Ayn Rand wanted none of it. Instead, she celebrated the American capitalist experience, where individuality was celebrated. Even though the assimilation of so many people from so many cultures has led to labeling America as a 'melting pot', it never meant that all kinds of immigrants were melded into a single gray mass. That never happened. Instead, America celebrates its diversity, and the equal opportunity for all to see their fortunes decline together as the middle class – maybe America's crowning social achievement -- is disappearing on the waves of debt engineered by the banking and investment communities. The trends she predicted toward neutering rational intelligence seem to be arriving more or less on schedule. She died in 1982, maybe before she saw individuality – and the middle class that individuality created – begin the long slide into mediocre lives being lived by mediocre people drugged with consumerism and seeing their futures co-opted by credit card and mortgage debt.

What is most compelling about Ayn Rand's philosophy is that if there is a moral imperative in life, it is to be ethical. As she used the term, ethics refers to responsibility, to

leadership of worthwhile causes, one of which is to benefit, if not profit, from everything you do for God, country, or company. As I understood her objectivist philosophy, it was about intelligent use of resources and returns on investment, about doing good for others and doing well for yourself. Maybe it would be called enlightened self-interest, and certainly that would be virtuous selfishness.

An American pastor friend, whose ministry is deeply invested in working with homeless people, ex-prisoners, and addicts, said recently that if churches in the U.S. spent more time doing what they were supposed to do, instead of congratulating themselves on their foreign missions, there would be a lot fewer hungry and homeless people across the street, in their own neighborhoods. But that kind of nurturing does not provide a platform for egoism, egotism, self aggrandizing. No one seems to care when their neighbor fails or falls, and lifting them up is not so praise-worthy as bringing light to the distant benighted.

3. WHAT SHALL WE DO IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD?

Forgive me if I seem to speak now from stereotypes, because I really do not have a lot of personal experience in your neighborhood. I know that there are great and fine people everywhere, and that all cultures harbor some folks who missed out on citizenship training and end up being actively anti-social. Among them are people who have little going for them beyond ego, pride of place, and many hundreds of years of their forebears having essentially the same experiences and the same limiting outlook on the world beyond their villages and valleys. But now that the mobile telephone has intruded, bypassing telephone poles and copper wires, soon really cheap computers will arrive that work off that mysterious 'cloud' in which software and files are housed, and that will really let the genie out of the bottle. Those people, trapped for centuries in non-literate communities with women locked in servitude and silence watching child brides getting pregnant, milking goats, and carrying water; and boy soldiers carrying AK-47s and wearing ragged clothes – all of them are going to see Paree.

That vision leaves a lot of gaps to be filled for most of the world's people. Mobile technology has made it possible to bring New York and Paris into the most remote villages and valleys. And the impact of that? Who wants to herd goats when all that glitter is available in cities. But historically, that migration from fields and farms into cities has been going on as long as there have been cities. Now, that migration will intensify, but the migrants will be even more inept in coping with the intricacies of city life – not because they are more handicapped than those who migrated before them, but because urban life is increasingly more complex. (If you have not seen the films *Babel* and *God Grew Tired of Us*, check them out for sympathetic portrayals of culture clashes.)

From this brief sketch of current events, what can we imagine? Perhaps first, migrants need orientation to prevent their becoming victims in the city or joining the criminal underclass. That means jobs for migrants and job training and support networks to ease the transition. (It was hard for mainstream Americans to believe that during the early civil rights initiatives thirty years ago, and perhaps currently, people showed up for job training who honestly did not understand that they were to show up at 08:00 for five consecutive days. Work routines were not part of their experience, nor of those close to them.) As you have seen on TV, even Gay Paree is periodically afflicted by street riots, car burnings, looting, and stone-throwing young people whose cultures are not being assimilated into that of their French hosts.

I know and you know these things are ‘wrong.’ But what would we do if we were in the 17 to 23 age range, with no jobs, no prospects of economic self-sufficiency, no future worth waiting for? Maybe we would be throwing stones and burning cars, too. And maybe blowing up ourselves and others.

The obvious answers are so ... obvious! Education and jobs! But education is based on deferred gratification, promises made by a society you cannot trust. And jobs for people with minimal education follow well-worn paths to Asia and Africa. How do you break that pattern?

Some countries in this southern neighborhood have created beautiful television commercials that invite tourists and even employers (!!) to come see and stay. But if you were a business person looking for a congenial place to build a plant and create jobs, would you come to this neighborhood? It is common knowledge that bribes and associated corruption are a normal part of life around here. In fact, in my present home of Lithuania, Transparency International found several years ago that 30 percent of the citizens had paid bribes, and 49 percent thought their Parliament was “very corrupt.”⁴ In such an environment, why wait for months to get permission to do something when a few dollars can make it happen in days or weeks?

But it’s not always a matter of a few dollars. In one case in your neighborhood, a company that would hire 400 people was building a plant. The road to the site was paved, the foundation had been poured, the roof was in place. Alas, the representative of the telecommunication provider demanded several hundred thousand dollars to make the necessary connections. Work on the plant was halted that day, and the company withdrew. Those 400 jobs and the tax revenues the plant would have produced never happened.

In another case, a former colleague reported that his friend, who managed a manufacturing plant also in your neighborhood, said that bribes he had to pay constituted forty percent of his operating expenses! If you or I had that information, would we bring our businesses here, no matter how little we had to pay our workers? That brings us to a fundamental, neighborhood-shaping, ethical decision. It can be said this way: If your operation cannot be profitable if you have to pay bribes *and* fair wages, and you cannot operate at all if you do not pay the bribes, which do you choose?

A rational person will say, “Why, that’s no choice at all!” Except, of course, to take our businesses elsewhere.

Also, in this small scenario, it becomes painfully obvious how residents of our neighborhood are condemned to earn the lowest possible wages. That, in turn, predicts really low payments into social security systems and that, in turn, means that people too old to work will not have adequate incomes; and that, in turn, means further burdens on the state that will be honored only grudgingly; and that, in turn, guarantees impoverished neighborhoods, inadequate educational services, an environment that does not encourage industrialization; and that, in turn, guarantees another generation of stone-throwing, car-burning kids on the streets.

4. IS THERE A BETTER WAY?

Surely, there must be! In this room full of educated and thinking individuals, there must be many thoughtful solutions – but none are likely to work because they will put you and me into opposition to your culture. The culture that supports corruption is the same one that prompts your aunt to berate you for living in the city and leaving your widowed mother living alone in the village. Her sister lives nearby, but does not offer help because it is the duty of

the daughter (or a son's wife) to take care of the mother in her own home! When duty/obligation and honor in a culture are so strong and so situation specific, it is not too large a leap of logic to expect honor killings and other tragedies.

Nothing less than heroic action by a very important person (VIP) relevant to the culture can break the cycle, recognizing that there still will be individuals who want to live with the old ways. They have to be accepted or sanctioned in some way (another ethical decision).

Sanctions? Where is this heading?

To a place – an idea – that may not have been one among the many in this room. Imagine this: Panoramic photographs of your country's most beautiful scenes; photographs of handsome and beautiful people, your country's work force; compelling background music. Then the images in this prime-time commercial on CNN International fade. Your president fills the TV screen. He or she speaks to business people, pitching the benefits of bringing jobs to your country. Then the camera closes on the president's face as he or she makes this remarkable statement: "If you bring your company and your jobs to our wonderful country, I give you my personal promise, the guarantee of my government, that you will not be confronted by dishonest and dishonorable officials with their hands out for pay-offs. And if anyone among the contractors you employ, or their sub-contractors, attempts to force you to engage in illegal payments, you have only to call the special telephone number I will give you, and we – my government and I -- will take care of your problem!"

I will leave you to imagine how such problems should be resolved. But do remember that any company that comes to your country, willing to pay bribes, is not coming for the good of your people. They come to take advantage of the desperation of workers without choices. Maybe poorly-paid jobs are better than no jobs, but still.... And as for ethics, count on those companies to take their jobs further south or east in the search for cheap labor and governments that are soft on health and safety issues and on workers' rights.

Since I come from the United States, I should say that these dynamics of corporate greed are not unknown there. In one case, a famous manufacturer of electrical hand tools escaped the unions, high taxes and utility bills in the northeast with its harsh winters, and moved to the so-called 'Sun Belt.' After taking advantage of local hospitality, low wages, no unions, and tax breaks, within five years the company moved south of the border into Mexico, leaving the workers and the local government-financed buildings behind. Many other companies, high-tech and low-tech, including the iconic Hershey's Chocolate, have made the move.

Perhaps there is an analog to be found in the issue of food availability and starvation. 'They' say that there is no shortage of food. Instead, there is a distribution problem rooted in political and economic decisions. That translates into governments, acting or not. Recently, the ambassador of a wine-producing country, serving in a country of wine consumers, approached that state's regulators about importing more wines. The ambassador was told that "transportation arrangements" had been made and did not include more wine from his country. "Suppose I bring it in my own trucks?" he asked. The government agent advised the ambassador, "Your trucks might never arrive!"

5. WILL PEOPLE EVER MATTER?

Again, later in my life than might have been the case, I learned that there are only two sources of problems in our world -- *religion* and *special interests* – and the needs, aspirations, and safety of real people are subordinated to these powerful forces and alliances.

Religion, and the conflicts and slaughter it spawns, are self-evident in current events. But what are these special interests?

Of course, religion is one, with its programs of proscriptions and divisiveness and money and power. But the more usual special interests might be universities competing for governmental funding; weapons manufacturers and the military establishments that buy the weapons (with government money); pharmaceutical companies controlling the price of drugs (with complicit governments, which is why many Americans make monthly trips to Canada or Mexico to fill prescriptions). And then there is counter-terrorism, which has spawned millions of jobs and consumes billions of dollars as the rights and freedoms of people are abrogated in defense against a relative handful of militant religionists and other disaffected nutcases.

But another special interest you probably did not consider is the prison industry. As our societies become more complex, what are we to do with all those who do not fit in, who cannot compete economically, who should never have left the villages and valleys where they knew how to cope? If you are in the prison industry, every person convicted of a crime is a new source of (government) revenue. A friend who worked for ten years at Riker's Island, the famous prison on an island run by the New York City Department of Corrections, said that very few people comprehend the scope of that industry. (I tell my students who are unclear about career direction to consider penology or gerontology as we will never run out of prisoners to be locked away and old people to be nurtured.)

Other special interests that impact us are hospitals and medical insurance providers, public safety programs and employees, teachers and administrators (and the text publishers and others who serve the educational establishment), and other government services and employees. (America's strongest and most aggressive union is said to be the California Teachers' Association.) So at a level that is not too abstract, all of us are beneficiaries of one or several special interest groups, and the victims of others.

So what do we do about the economics of our neighborhood? Well, job creation for sure, since your neighborhood probably is already at ten percent unemployment or higher, and the last thing we need is more people coming to town to become unemployed rock throwers. The transition from manual labor through the industrial to the post-industrial eras has left many without necessary skills beyond low-level service jobs. In fact, in mid-year 2010, UNDP estimated that 45 million jobs are needed around the world – right now -- to return employment to 2007 levels⁵. Further, if you consider the projected population increases from six-plus billion people on earth to nine billion, and that a minimum of one job is required for each 3 persons, then another billion or so jobs will be needed in the next several decades.

Do you have any ideas about how to create a billion jobs, and how to pay those employees and provide them with benefits? Staffing prisons and retirement centers will not be sufficient.

What about food production and distribution, and water-resource management? We have been warned about shortages that will lead to riots, and we can imagine that small or large wars will follow. Among all the talented people here and in other universities and think tanks, surely there must be some who can conjure workable schemes to avoid the predictable. With all the weapons in the neighborhood and the overheated masculinity that is reported to exist, serious combat is not only possible, it's probable. But surely, in this room and in the rest of the University, and among your colleagues in other schools, there are some ideas about how to avoid calamities. You know, community development sorts of things. But that is another lecture, so moving toward ending this one....

Maybe the only real solutions are to be found in doing what we already know is needed – but lack the courage to do. For example, we all know about the problems of illegal immigrants who undermine labor rates wherever they congregate. And how do we handle that issue? We catch and deport illegals. But what do we do to the people who hire them, whose jobs are the magnets for the migrants? And what about the so-called drug problem? We persecute the entrepreneurs who supply the market instead of prosecuting the consumers who create the market. Can you imagine how much money is spent on drug interdiction, and how many other programs are never developed so we can pay for the war on drugs? And the war on Terrorism?

Meanwhile, no country's president can make a TV commercial promising legitimate entrepreneurs protection from graft and threats. Imagine what our societies could become if that were possible! Could that actually happen? Only, a company president said, if you have an honest judiciary. He recalled firing a woman for stealing 1,500 Euros. She rebutted by suing him for 30,000 Euros for the mental anguish he caused her. She paid-off the judge and won – but lost in a higher court in which she couldn't bribe the judge. What a waste of time and money for the employer!

At less utopian levels, there is much that can be done, given the ingenuity of those whose creative juices are now expended in beating the system to get the things they want. Can we recapture those talents and energies and focus them on solving problems that otherwise will diminish the quality of life for most of us? If you want to help in that process, you probably already know where to go and whom to contact.

None of us can do it all, but all of us can do some of it. But will we? What do you think?

CONCLUSIONS

Well, what can we conclude? Is precedence predictive, the prologue to another victory for special interests? The oil interests have driven up the price of fuels and other petroleum products. The military-industrial complex that U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower warned against in his last speech seems not to have lost its clout with decision-makers. China's growing middle class is consuming more, and that is creating powerful competition for the grains and fabrics we need to support our industries and peoples at prices that do not create economic disequilibrium. India is not far behind as a major and probably aggressive competitor for raw materials at convenient prices. Egypt had food riots two years ago as the price of wheat escalated, while grains are converted to motor vehicle fuels in South and North America, creating more demand and driving prices up.

We have been warned for years that water tables around the world are shrinking, that salt water is encroaching, and told that the cost of desalination plants makes water almost prohibitively expensive. What would a smart person conclude – about business opportunities, about life-style changes, about impact on the weakest economic competitors among our people, and the social threats these very visible trends predict as surely sunrises and sunsets? Maybe it is time to return to the homeowners' fall-out shelters of the 1950s, where each of us burrows underground with our barrels of water and tinned biscuits and powdered milk. But if that happens, shame on us as so-called educated people. Shame on us as people trained to lead. Shame on us for being fearful to confront our governments about their preoccupation with wars and weapons instead of using scarce resources to support a quality of life that provides enough for everyone and directs us away from the old and proven lose-lose formula that those with the gold make the rules.

And there is this to be considered by smart people – your brains will ask more questions than they can answer, and one of the best ways to avoid action is to continue to ask questions – as though there really is a wide range of choices. And if the smart people do not organize into an intelligent force for change, you can be sure that someone will come, waving a flag and claiming to be God’s own, who will offer to lead us to law and order and to impose a discipline that we will not enjoy. Haven’t we already been there and done that? Do we have to do it again? What do you think?

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