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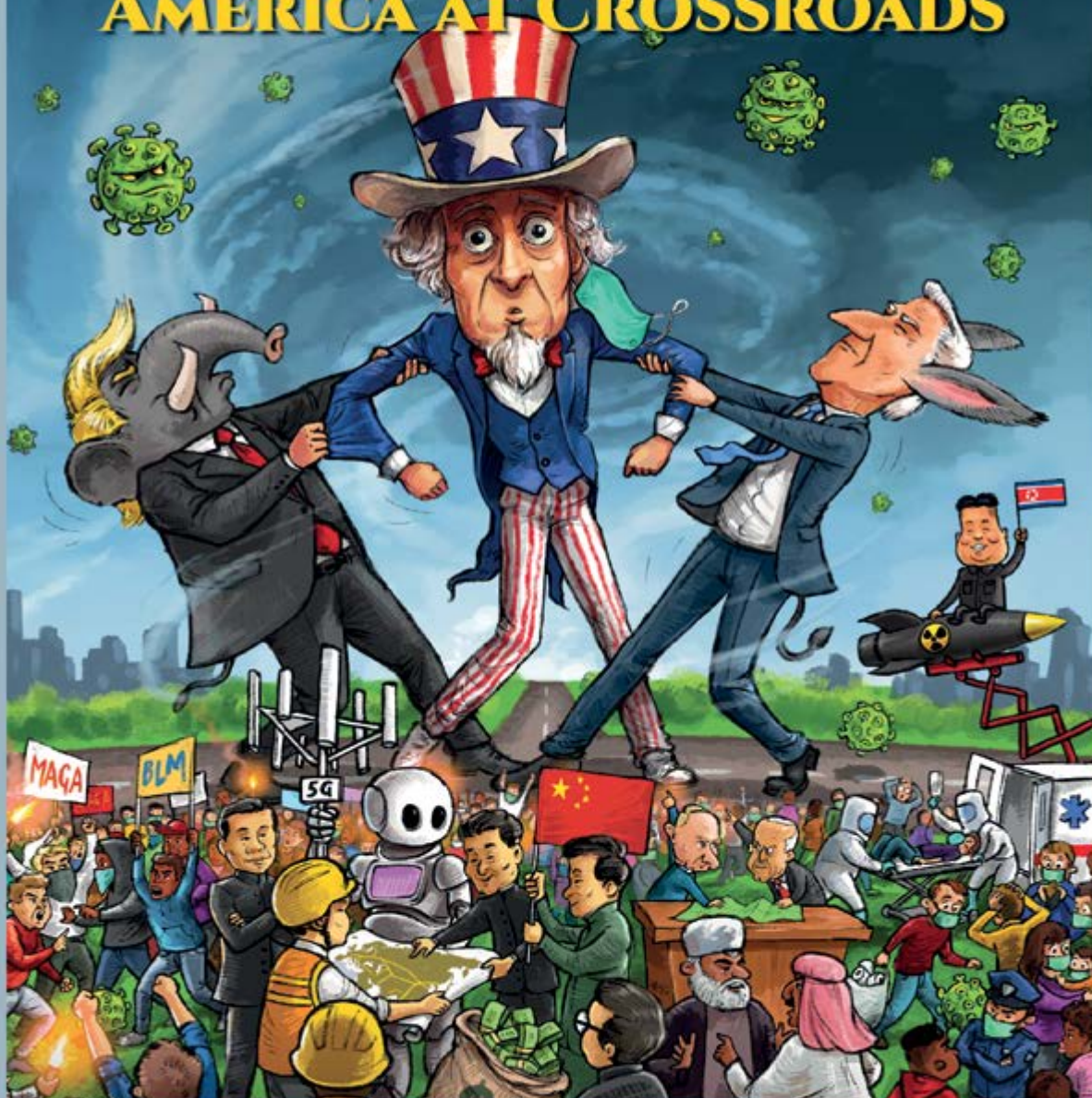
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FACING UP TO THE TRUTH

A CONSERVATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Todd Huizinga

WHY is America experiencing such a profound crisis? Why are the country's divisions becoming so destructive, so seemingly unbridgeable? Why are we "coming apart" to an extent far in excess of even the dire economic and cultural polarization that the sociologist Charles Murray documented in his book of that title in 2012?

An insidious stealth ideology is at the core of the country's predicament: a poorly understood postmodernism has permeated the social institutions whose ideas and pronouncements dominate the American cognitive environment. In academia, the media, the arts and entertainment, in many of our governing institutions from local to national, even in a good portion of the business world, Americans subconsciously see truth as arbitrary and subjective: a tool used in power games and for political advantage.

Objective truth does not really exist, and anyone who claims it does is in effect trying to construct a narrative for his own political, economic, or social advantage. Real truth is whatever each person makes it out to be. Whatever each individual or social group wants to be true *is* what is in fact true for that individual or group. Truth must correspond to our desires, and to hell with the idea that truth must correspond to reality.

THE RAGE AGAINST REALITY

This disregard of truth has expressed itself in two primary ways. The first is the postmodern transformation of a belief that has always been deeply ingrained in the American cultural landscape: the idea that each individual is the master of his own political fate; that no government has the right to impose a certain religious faith, a particular worldview, or set of opinions on its citizens.

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"With malice toward none; with charity for all..."

With the growing secularization of our cultural elites and the general waning of religious faith in the last half of the twentieth century, this ideal of individual freedom from undue government interference—basic to the American experiment in liberty—came unmoored. It lost its grounding in the Judeo-Christian view of the human person as created by God with certain unalienable rights. In the resulting free-floating moral confusion, it then morphed from a primarily political right into the *moral* right of everyone to decide *everything* for himself. Each person suddenly had the right to choose—essentially regardless of any external considerations or constraints—

how she should live, what she should believe, what she should recognize as true and real.

In principle, if not in fact, whatever decision anyone made about any question regarding her- or himself was ipso facto a good and right decision. And the cultural elites led the way into this abyss. As the U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy famously wrote in 1992: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." There you have it: the heart of liberty—the heart of the American

experiment—was henceforth to recognize the right of every person to decide what’s true for himself. To claim that there might be any authoritative truth regarding existence, meaning, the universe, and the mystery of life that might override any individual’s personal preference was to be anti-freedom, anti-democratic, anti-American.

Shortly after the idolization of individual choice became the “heart of liberty,” the disregard of truth found a second, now even more virulent, avenue of expression. Ironically, *individual* choice came to be complemented by what passes for *group* choice, in the form of identity politics. In fact, one can identify not just one, but two ways in which the quasi-collective group focus of identity politics consummates radical moral individualism.

First, identity politics simply “elevates” individual choice to the next level, the group level. Just as each individual decides for himself what is true for him, each group also gets to decide for itself what is true for it—what constitutes its identity—and to brand those who disagree as racist, homophobic, xenophobic, transphobic, or whatever “-phobic” might happen to be in fashion on any particular day or at any particular time.

The second way that the cult of the group arises directly out of the cult of the individual is that identity politics is the desperate attempt to counteract the breakdown in human relations that has resulted from the glorification of individual choice. To paraphrase what Mary Eberstadt points out so well in her book *Primal Screams: How the Sexual Revolution Created Identity Politics* (2019): identity politics is the primal scream of those who live in societies that have sacrificed family, community, and all other human ties that bind at the altar of unfettered individual choice.

We thought we were getting liberation, the “heart of liberty,” but we got isolation instead. We reaped the consequences of putting individual autonomy, the right to choose for myself who I am, what is true for me, and how I want to live, above all other considerations. Now that we no longer allow the ties that bind us—such as family, church, community, and tradition—to inhibit our right to decide for ourselves who we are, these human connections have weakened and, in too many cases, disappeared.

In our liberation, we discover that we are now utterly alone. Under these circumstances, it is only logical that a new collectivism has arisen.

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AN UNBRIDGEABLE DIVIDE

And now that a postmodern worldview has taken root on the left side of the political spectrum in the United States, we find that we no longer have societies in the West in which most everyone, on both the center-right and the center-left, adheres to a common world view that corresponds to reality. Instead, we have the traditionalists on the right who hold to a basically Judeo-Christian view of an unchanging human nature embedded in tradition, religion, community, and family—the worldview that grounds self-government in the West. And on the left—and increasingly on the post-religious right—we have postmodern progressives who, whether they realize it or not, are committed to a radically secularist vision of the virtually unlimited malleability of human nature according to each person’s choice: essentially independent of traditional institutions and social relations.

What is truth? There is no truth. Thus, in seeking to find some sort of basis upon which we can live together despite our differences in political perspective, we can no longer safely appeal to anything at all as true for all of us. It has become oppressive to assert that

anything could be objectively true for everyone, regardless of how they might “feel.” That’s why our polity is threatening to unravel.

Another factor that *Commentary*, the American magazine of conservative Jewish thought and opinion, recently called “the great unravelling” is that, if you’ve committed yourself to taking your own desires as the measure of truth in disregard of obvious reality, you need to be energetic, determined, and ruthless in asserting your right to decide what’s true against the possibility that others will look at reality and come to a different conclusion. Embittered rancor is part of the package.

The vehemence and hatred in our political culture, as exemplified by this summer’s riots in the United States, the lawless tearing down of statues, the ritual shouting-down of the police are simply physical manifestations of this rage against reality, this will to destroy the foundations of society as it is, to tear down what exists just because it’s there. And physical violence is complemented by a politics of personal destruction that has now spun treacherously out of control: in every area of life, people have been forced out of their jobs,

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suffered public shaming on social media, and been “cancelled”—shunned into silence—for uttering even one opinion that does not meet with the approval of the left, or even for formulating “correct” opinions in the wrong way.

In an America that has always cherished freedom, we are witnessing how deeply totalitarian it is to deny the obvious fact that authoritative truth exists, and that valid truth claims must correspond to reality.

It is very important to note that what makes the situation even worse

is that most postmoderns are blissfully unaware of the ideology that they hold. They’ve never carefully thought about it. They’ve just subconsciously imbibed it from the cognitive environment that surrounds them. And since their stealth ideology rules out all opposing truth claims (denying their validity, as it were), it is out of bounds—impolite at best and “hate speech” at worst—to call their postmodern ideology by name and subject it to critical examination.

Not to dwell on the obvious, but this type of arbitrary, ever unpredictable relativization of truth isn’t exactly a recipe for peace and harmony in a diverse society.

THE SWEET DREAM OF PRINCIPLED PLURALISM

Where do we go from here? How do we move forward in a society divided into two camps holding completely irreconcilable, mutually opposing worldviews? And

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in which, I might add, the destructive worldview—the *wrong* worldview—is the one that rules in our opinion-forming institutions, and thus exercises such immense power over the hearts and minds of everyday people?

The instinct of many people, motivated by a

laudable desire to be tolerant and nice, is to try to accommodate our differences in some sort of Cold-War-style peaceful coexistence. One approach of this type that is popular among some conservative-to-moderate Protestants is called “principled pluralism.” It may be defined as follows:

Principled pluralism is a system in which government, civil society institutions, and citizens recognize a society’s religious and worldview diversity; in which they uphold and respect the right of diverse communities to bring their core convictions to bear in the public square, that is, in their political, social and cultural engagement.

All things being equal, I would wholeheartedly support the accommodating approach that seeks to get along in peace with the other side. But the problem is, it won’t work. The advocates of “principled pluralism” assume goodwill on all sides. They assume that most all the participants in the public square are open to reason and reasoned argument.

Unfortunately that is not the case, and those who attempt to practice “principled pluralism” are in effect playing into the hands of the postmoderns. Attributing

goodwill to the other side in the absence of actual goodwill is very dangerous in our situation: it lends legitimacy to a subversive attack on the system of government and way of life we are trying to preserve. That’s what too many center-left liberals are doing, desperately trying to curry the favor of the postmoderns.

But this type of appeasement will never succeed. It will only give the movement that is already tearing us apart more room to breathe, more time to develop further an ideology and praxis that can only become more destructive. The conservative thinker (and, as it happens, a convert

to Eastern Orthodoxy) Rod Dreher hit the nail on the head when he wrote that “a revolution’s ultimate power comes from its being underestimated, tolerated, or accepted by those outside its ranks.”

Pluralism is exactly what the new progressives are trying to destroy. We who believe in truth must embrace pluralism in the political arena, both because it recognizes the fact of diversity, and because political diversity itself is good.

THE WAR FOR CIVILITY

But the fact that “principled pluralism” is the wrong approach does not mean that we should reject pluralism itself. Pluralism is exactly what the new progressives are trying to destroy. We who believe in truth must embrace pluralism in the

political arena, both because it recognizes the fact of diversity, and because political diversity itself is good.

Every human being is flawed and limited in his knowledge. Left unchecked, human beings tend to pursue selfish ends. Power that is concentrated in too few hands—be it political or ideological or any other kind of power—tends to lead to tyranny. Since I am a Christian, for example, I acknowledge human sinfulness. I know that anyone, even the people I myself agree with, would ultimately lord it over others if they ruled in a one-party state. So the existence of diverse groups representing differing

perspectives, along with separation of powers and checks and balances, is an essential characteristic of any free and just society.

So the question for our day is: what does it mean to be a pluralist in a context in which our opponents are dead set against pluralism and have twisted, distorted, and redefined all the terms commonly associated with pluralism—tolerance, diversity, inclusiveness, equality, freedom, choice?

As I have already indicated, I think first of all a pluralist must realize that the views of many of our progressive opponents can no longer be accommodated in a pluralistic system, as the purveyors of “principled pluralism” desperately hope. We are in a political and cultural war, fighting to maintain a pluralist polity that guarantees freedom of speech, freedom of religion and conscience, freedom of the press, and our other fundamental liberties against the direct attacks of the progressive left. Trying to reach an accommodation with those who want to destroy pluralism won’t work.

We are in a political and cultural war, fighting to maintain a pluralist polity that guarantees freedom of speech, freedom of religion and conscience, freedom of the press, and our other fundamental liberties against the direct attacks of the progressive left. Trying to reach an accommodation with those who want to destroy pluralism won’t work.

The editors of *Commentary* put it as well as anyone: “Through the violent politicization of all aspects of American life, the mob aims to destroy the country as we know it and replace it with a new one—an anti-America that trades speech for violence, police for thought police, a free press for an indoctrination network, and the respect due the citizen for the obeisance owed the mob. There is one way to stop the unraveling: refuse the mob.” We have to stop allowing the divisive ideology of identity politics to separate people according to race, gender, and other categories. We must dare to call out the totalitarian brutality with which the post-moderns attempt to ostracize and destroy other people because of their opinions. Such brutality must no longer be tolerated as a legitimate aspect of the debate in the public square. The “culture war” we find ourselves in is a war for civility and a war against brutality—and it is a battle that we who strive for peace must fight.

REASSERTING TRUTH

We have to realize we’re at war, and we have to fight. But the only chance we have to win—if we define “winning” as preserving the American

system of self-government—is if we fight with the weapons of peace. We have to propagate and practice charity—that “benevolent goodwill toward or love” of others that is necessary to maintain freedom and justice in a pluralist society. This entails reasserting a basic truth upon which the American political system is founded, with an emphasis on the charitable attitude that adherence to that truth entails.

That basic truth, boiled down to its essence, is this: there are two sides to human nature. All human beings are, on the one hand, in possession of unalienable dignity, and thus possess unalienable rights. The U.S. Declaration of Independence states that it is the primary duty of government to secure those rights for its citizens:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

At the same time, all human beings are flawed. We are fallible and subject to the temptation to abuse power. This is why every functioning

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democracy establishes separation of powers and checks and balances. Because human beings are unchangeably subject to corruption and abuse of power, the reach of government must be limited and divided into multiple branches, so that the flawed human beings who hold governmental power cannot impose a tyranny on everyone else. We are all of immeasurable worth, yet we are all flawed. The great Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, one of the past century’s great foes of totalitarianism, put it as follows: “the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart and through all human hearts.” This two-sidedness is at the core of human nature, and it is the recognition of that truth that grounds the American system of government. The *Federalist Papers*, in which the founding fathers James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay lay out the rationale for the United States Constitution, is suffused with this view of human nature.

Understood and applied correctly, this truth about human beings encourages in everyone a charitable attitude toward others, an attitude that

acknowledges the dignity of all—even one’s political opponents—while recognizing the flaws in oneself.

Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural address, spoken on 4 March 1865 as the Civil War—to this day the bloodiest war in American history—was drawing to a close (and only 41 days before Lincoln’s assassination at the hand of a political adversary), couldn’t be more relevant to America’s current situation: “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds...to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.”

It is this charity toward all and malice toward none that we need to practice if we want to stop and reverse the great unravelling that we are experiencing and move forward in a way that can restore our unity as Americans.

POLITICS AND THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH

It is absolutely essential to understand that this basic assertion about human nature—namely, that we each possess an ineffable dignity that nothing can take away and at the same time, that we are flawed, fallible, and limited in our knowledge—is a useful political tool only because it is true.

And in this postmodern age in which novelty is one of the highest values, we need to make the case that this centuries-old insight remains compellingly true and necessary today.

In fact, conservatives must not shrink from the challenge of making the case for this view of human nature as a truth that is so fundamental that it can legitimately claim the status of a proposition upon which we build our other beliefs, rather than one that we can accept only if it is somehow independently verifiable. This is not a rejection of reason, like the postmodern rejection of reason. Rather, it is simply the acknowledgment that all reasoning is based on pre-suppositions which cannot be “proven” independently, but which form the necessary premises on the basis of which we reason.

So how do we know this two-sided view of human nature is true? To put it simply, it is the view that seems best not only to correspond to reality, but also to explain it and give it purpose. First of all, our moral intuition tells us it is true. We all have a conscience: an innate sense of right and wrong, of true and false. It is that faculty that the great theologian John Calvin called the *sensus divinitatis*, the innate sense of divinity that no human being can escape. Also, anyone is who is at all self-reflective cannot but acknowledge the fact of this two-sided

human nature in herself and other people that she knows. Finally, to circle back to its usefulness, and to how its usefulness is evidence of its truth, this view of human nature *works*. It corresponds to political reality. It has undergirded what is arguably the most successful and just form of government in world history, namely, republican-democratic self-government under the rule of law. Radiating out from the Judeo-Christian West, it has resulted in free societies in which human rights are respected, social peace is promoted and the weak and powerless are protected. Our *sensus divinitatis* tells us—and reliably so—that this is good; these are the characteristics of a good polity that respects truth.

By contrast, the problem with post-modernist progressivism is that it is rooted in a false view of the world. If a worldview does not correspond to reality, it will have dire consequences. And the postmodern view fails at its very root to correspond to reality. In fact, it is fundamentally incoherent: if you deny truth, then how can you come up with a worldview that is true or that corresponds to reality? If a worldview isn’t true, then it’s hard to deny that it’s false. And a false worldview is a worthless fantasy at best, a damnable lie at worst.

For example, one might underestimate Justice Anthony Kennedy’s famous “mystery of life” passage as a

misguided but essentially harmless example of touchy-feely, New-Age fluff: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” But that ignores the fact that the “mystery of life” mus-ing undergirds the Court’s finding in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, the 1992 Supreme Court decision to uphold the constitutional right to abortion. It is the central plank in the Court’s justification of the “right to choose.” And, whatever your preferred views on abortion, it is undeniable that the result of the Court majority’s assent to this view that “the heart of liberty” is to decide for oneself what is true has been the death of millions of living beings, whether you “choose” to call them pre-human or non-human fetuses or whether you “choose” to call them unborn children.

It is no coincidence that abortion, euthanasia (expanding inexorably—in the real world—from terminally ill adults to the chronically ill, to people with dementia, to depressed and lonely people, to confused and innocent children), proposed healthcare rationing, increasing tolerance for infanticide, and all other kinds of violence flow out of a worldview that denies truth. If truth is something that can be freely chosen, then power is all that counts. Those who are weak and powerless will not be able to exercise their right to choose; they will be shunted aside at the whim

of the powerful. Pope John Paul II called it what it is: the culture of death.

As you have noticed, I believe that the battle that we must fight in the United States and, indeed, in all of postmodern Western civilization, is not first and foremost a battle for a certain political perspective. In fact, on any given political question, the other side might have it right and conservatives might be wrong. Maybe we should, for example, increase the role of the state in healthcare, say, or peacefully remove statues of particularly controversial historical figures. Certainly, most American conservatives and progressives agree that we should do all we can to eliminate discrimination on the basis of race or sex, and reasonable people understand that on any such complex issue, the devil is in the details. So the battle that we are unavoidably embroiled in is not a fight for a particular political perspective. Rather, it is a battle for truth. To overcome the profound polarization of American society and politics, we need to renew a shared dedication to the common pursuit of truth across political and social divides, and a recognition of the limits

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of politics. That will require that identity politics, at least in its current malevolent form, be defeated and consigned to the proverbial dustbin of history.

Conservatives should not be afraid to acknowledge the grim reality of the culture war that is raging in the public square. They should refrain from joining the beleaguered center-left liberals and the equally harried “principled pluralists” in shouting “peace, peace” when there is no peace. But it is key that in our political engagement, we have to become *less* political. Politics comes *after*, not before, our calling to be human beings; to be people who value other people—all other people—as we value ourselves. Though the dated terminology might now be considered politically incorrect, the wisest possible response to identity politics and the other contrivances of political postmodernism is contained in a children’s hymn written in the early twentieth century, one that expresses our common moral intuition, our *sensus divinitatis*, with childlike clarity: “Red, brown, yellow, black, and white, they are precious in His sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world.”