



"Why, it's all right here in black and white!"

James Cagney consults the voice of the power elite in Billy Wilder's *One, Two, Three* (1961).

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Hypnotic Clarity versus the Conscious Citizen

Human history can be seen as a long series of experiments – although most often we are unaware that we have been conducting them. The collapse of the Soviet Bloc has been recognized as the end of a very long and often painful experiment. But a decade later, democratic societies are slowly coming to the realization that we are at the end of an unsuccessful experiment of our own – an experiment that has placed us in a very dangerous situation. The good news is: we have been here before, and if we remember our history and the lessons learned, our future experiments can strengthen responsible individualism and democratic society.



WE are living now in an atmosphere of inevitability, which means a demotion of the public good to a second or third or even fourth level of importance in our society. An "atmosphere of inevitability" is the traditional, indeed the standard cloak of ideology. Of any ideology. And what is ideology but aggressive naïveté? That is all it is. Nothing more than the denial of intelligence, a denial of the possibility of human discourse. That is why ideology is so dependent on tools such as fear and "inevitably" in order to fool you into thinking that nothing else can be done.

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What it provides, what it produces, this aggressive naïveté, is a rhetoric that screams "reality," that creates a kind of delusionary state in which there are false, Manichean oppositions. I would call these "the temptations of the hypnotic clarity of false choices." These hypnotic clarities of false choices in fact deny us the choice of direction. They proclaim an absolute resolution. An elimination of doubt. Yet, the belief that we may choose among several directions is the central theme of any functioning democracy and therefore of the public good. Not only choose, but then change our minds. So what we are seeing is a denial of the public good. You cannot believe in democracy if you do not believe that several choices are possible.

The problem is that these false choices have become so thoroughly hypnotic that many people who are in some way "progressive" – or what I often call "humanist" – find themselves (at least over the last twenty years) spending so much time explaining why they are not hypnotized that they have actually lost the debate – which indicates that they probably were hypnotized. We find our friends spending the first half hour of a discussion explaining why they are not against free trade but, but, but ... and that seems to finish off the rest of the argument before it gets started.

Citizens find themselves endlessly faced with these bogus oppositions. I think that the central false choice of the last twenty years has been to choose, as a citizen, between those two great enemy Titans – government and market. It is an astonishing idea! How could we choose between the government and the market? *We are the government!* But then the ideological proposition of false choices always requires a sort of lunatic complicity.

For myself, I am in favour of the market place. And clearly, since I am not a masochist, I am in favour of government. Neither is perfect. The debate is not about whether they are perfect. But because we have accepted a Manichean form of argument, we find ourselves facing proposals for anti-governmental legislation. For example, there is a rising tide of anti-debt laws, laws that rigidly require balanced budgets except in emergency conditions.

Western democracies slowly learned over the nineteenth century that – like the kings, like the popes, like the nobles, like the corporations – we also, as a government, could go into debt in order to build the democratic nation state. It is something individuals and organizations have done for a very long time. And for us to allow the establishment of laws that forbid public debt is to cooperate in a profoundly anti-democratic act. This has nothing to do with right or left. It has to do with the essential powers of the citizen.

In the same tradition of bogus oppositions, many people have fallen for the trick that a referendum is a democratic mechanism superior to representative democracy. But that is to forget our history. We all should know that referenda and the chimera of other forms of direct democracy have been used for 200 years in Western nation states as anti-democratic mechanisms.

In the late nineteenth century, the business community gradually established a utilitarian structure to run our market. The public mechanisms which followed in order to regulate and manage that market – that is to make it safe for civilization – were also utilitarian. And in reaction to all of that we, the citizens, created a mirror image of the economic structure to serve the public good – paving the way for institutions like Medicare. But we did it in a form that was also utilitarian. These “public good” mechanisms grew in an ad hoc manner, as is normal in a democracy. They were constantly adjusted and readjusted over time to improve the lives of a great many people, to help build a community that was much healthier and much better educated, a community where individuals and families had more opportunities and much more control over their own lives.

But after 75 years or so, that utilitarian “public good” structure had grown heavy, a bit complex, a bit creaky, although it still worked. Then suddenly it came under severe attack. People like Ronald Reagan began to say, *the government is on the taxpayer's back*. And it was then, in the late 1970s and early '80s, that people who believed themselves to be humanist and progressive should have stepped back from the daily fray and taken a good look at the ad hoc “public good” structure that had been built in the twentieth century. At the outset of the neo-conservatives' concerted attack on this structure, we should have said to ourselves: “This creation we have put in place has always been utilitarian, made to face a utilitarian economic structure. But now it is becoming sluggish, even cumbersome, and slow to respond to change.” That we failed to do so is a great tragedy. What was needed back then was a new revolution of the great moderate centre – of liberals and social democrats *and many conservatives*. We needed to consolidate the progressive achievements of this century with a new approach toward the “public good.” A clarification and consolidation of the ad hoc. Instead of that we have wasted the last 20 years defending the utilitarian structures and forgetting about the ideas that lie behind them. But it was the ideas – the ideas, not the structures – that allowed us to win so many important battles in the first place. It is those ideas which carry the public good from era to era.

Instead, we left ourselves wide open to the hypnotic clarity of false choices because we were so busy defending the details of the venerated structure in place. And in the process we left ourselves open to a subsidiary argument which claimed that there is a seamless web running all the way from self-interest to globalization – that somehow this single web would dominate how society would be guided in the future. We forgot what Harold Innis used to say – “Materialism is the auxiliary doctrine of every tyranny” – which is not to say that materialism is always bad, only that it should not be in charge of the direction that we take as human beings.

We stubbornly remained mesmerized by management structures, while the neo-conservatives charged past and set the agenda for the last decades of this century of frenzied human experimentation. And now we find ourselves near the end of a 25-year anti-humanist experiment in the reorganization of society. From country to country the experience has varied, but everywhere it has been part of the same approach. And nowhere in those 25 years have we seen an example of balanced growth in wealth. Bear in mind that 25 years is a long time – five times longer than a world war, two and a half times longer than Napoleon was in power. It is an incredibly long time to engage in a socio-economic experiment. Yes, certain kinds of wealth have been created, and not all are bad. And many of us have benefitted from this growth. But what is clear is that this experiment has produced a tremendous imbalance in wealth. Yes, “global” wealth has increased tremendously, but it has also grown *dangerously*. Unstable. Socially divisive. Profoundly inflationary. In the developed world, distribution is less and less arranged in the diamond shape of a democracy – with the bulk in the middle and sharp points at the top and bottom. It has been gradually reverting to a triangle, with the bulk of the population at the bottom and a tiny elite at the top. And if this structure collapses as it did in Mexico, as it is now doing in various parts of Latin America and Asia, then it will take a large part of the population with it and will create a disastrous situation.

FOR 10, 15, 20, 25 years, humanists have been fighting a rearguard action and seeming to lose ground with every passing year, but remember, we, indeed the world, have been here before. We went through this sort of experience in the late nineteenth century. And the last time around, when it came to the end of the experiment, we found ourselves entering a period of violent ideological swings and, in purely economic terms, we found ourselves going through increasingly volatile

boom/bust cycles. Yes, we have been here before. Yet today what do we hear from our elected officials? They talk about difficult times out there in the unpredictable world economy, "uncharted waters," "turbulent seas." But they were uncharted waters and turbulent seas 15 years ago, 20 years ago, 25 years ago. They have always been turbulent seas. That is the naturally unbalanced nature of the market place. Nothing has changed. Curiously enough, this seems to have been noticed – or rather, rennoticed – only in the last year or so. And these same elected leaders seem to have noticed only now that sitting back and leaving it to the "natural forces" of the economy somehow does not work.

What we have experienced is rather like a great 25-year wave. The force has gone out of the wave now; only the momentum remains. But that momentum is still very strong. The reputations, the careers of armies of experts and managers are dependent on it.

Recently, however, something revolutionary has been reported in newspapers around the world. At a G7 meeting, a radical new policy was announced. What surprised me was that you scarcely heard about it outside the business sections. In fact, most papers limited themselves to brief summaries focused on bailout efforts for Latin America, the least original part of the announcement. Only in *The Financial Times of London* were there six full articles on the initiative, including a large front-page headline and details of the G7's new agenda:

... they commit to develop and implement international principles and codes of best practice on physical policy, financial and monetary policy, corporate governance and accounting and to work to ensure that private sector institutions comply with new standards of disclosure.

Amazing! For the first time in 25 years the governments of the leading democracies have stopped pretending that everything is inevitably in the hands of the international market forces. They have clearly stated that they no longer believe in the natural balance of the market place, that they acknowledge the Invisible Hand is too invisible to be useful, let alone in charge. Suddenly they are stating that they should be in charge, that it is necessary for them to be in charge. In this we see the end of a failed experiment – a failure governments are as yet only half admitting, and only in a very technocratic way. Failure is so difficult for those with power to shoulder.

More important than their obsession with niceties is the reality of our situation. We are in danger today because when such an experiment fails and when there is, in large part, denial of the failure, the society is suddenly exposed. To what? To the possibility of violent



Marching orders: French schoolchildren take to the streets in support of the Popular Front, c. 1930.

swings. We have been here before, but today the world economy, the global population, and the capacity for mass destruction are all very different from what they were at the end of the last century – the stakes are much higher. It is extremely important that we take stock and consider carefully our options.

If you look at democratic societies, what you find is that they are constructed on the basis of the nation state, and the foundation of that is *responsible individualism*, which takes the formal form of *citizenship*, which turns into a *social contract*, which in practical terms is *democracy*. That is the real definition of a real nation, a real country. Therefore every economic power that is removed from a nation state and put into the international sector, without the creation of compensating international powers for the citizens to assert the public good, is an anti-democratic move; it is a regress, not a progress. International agreements based on theories that exclude the idea of aggressive citizenship are anti-democratic.

So why do we accept them? We do so in part because we have come to believe that the answer lies in the hands of professionals. They come up with professional answers, professional “truths”; they produce professional consensus, and somehow we follow behind it. Our very acceptance of this approach indicates a consensus. But again, remember, *consensus* is not a democratic concept.

The public good is about choices and therefore about debate and differences; it is about language. Democracy is about words, and it is about the *denial of truth*. After all, how can you have a debate if you already have the truth? The whole concept of such a truth is profoundly authoritarian. And having lost sight of that, we have lost also a great deal of time.

NOW here we are, living in a very delicate moment, living close to the end of a failed ideological experiment while our leaders are still half in denial – a denial that brings the risk of swings, not simply of the economic boom/bust sort, but profound ideological swings that could be extremely dangerous. The best protection for a democracy, for the public good, is not defensiveness at all, because *such protection is passivity*. The best defence is aggressiveness, the aggressiveness of the involved citizen. We need to reassert that slow, time-consuming, inefficient, boring process that requires our involvement; it is called *being a citizen*. The public good is not something that you can see. It is not static. It is a process. It is the process by which democratic civilizations build themselves.

