Comment: American Civilization, Catholic Social Thought, and the Populist-Oriented Social Policy of President Donald J. Trump
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This Comment concerns itself with the relationship between the social policies of U.S. President Donald J. Trump and, respectively, American civilization and Catholic social thought. Also included are discussions of two recent American populist social movements, the Tea Party and that one generated by a commitment to the Trump Presidency, insofar as the latter relates to the primary focus of this Comment.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Comment, at base, is twofold. The first is to analyze the logic of the social policy prescriptions of U.S. President Donald J. Trump in reforming what he sees as the dysfunctional direction of contemporary American civilization moving toward a broad acceptance of what Varacalli (1994) has termed a “radical multicultural” perspective that operates sotto voce but intentionally within a framework moving ever closer to that of a soft socialism. Radical multiculturalism is one in which the alleged concern for pluralism is, in actuality, nothing more than a thin veneer, a smokescreen for the attempted institutionalization of a progressive and, quite specifically, an upper middle–class ideological agenda for the United States.

The second purpose of this Comment is to analyze whether or not and to what degree the proposed Trumpian social policy violates or ignores the imperatives of Catholic social thought. Regarding the latter concern, highlighted is the distinction between first and non-negotiable principles of Catholic social thought and the various prudential applications and historical correlations of those principles in which the educated Catholic population can and should debate. Key here is President Trump’s implicit advocacy of something akin to what Michael Novak (1982) termed the ever-reforming nature of democratic capitalism as a key foundation for American society. The latter stands as a prudential option within a wider range of legitimate alternatives for the advocates and practitioners of Catholic social thought.

Also included in this Comment are less crucial but still important discussions of opposition/qualifications to Trumpian social policy on the
part of the elite leadership of, respectively, American progressives and the Democratic Party, on the one hand, and, on the other, American conservatives and the Republican Party. Additionally, a brief comparison will be included between the recent American populist-oriented movements of, respectively, first the Tea Party and, second, that centered around the vision of Donald J. Trump. The Comment incorporates published material from different political, cultural, and religious perspectives that focus on the Trump Presidency. It is also very important to stress that this Comment does not focus on the issue of the alleged moral failings of President Trump—whether real, perceived, exaggerated, or fabricated—as important as this issue is for the well-formed Catholic, Christian, or person with a natural law sensibility. Obviously, the divorces and numerous extramarital consensual sexual relations that Donald Trump has been involved in violate any authentically Catholic worldview. Again, the central focus here is on the social policy programs and vision of President Trump vis-à-vis the health and welfare of American, and derivatively, world civilization and also how those programs and vision ought to be critiqued from the corpus of Catholic social thought.

THE SOCIAL POLICY OF DONALD J. TRUMP

A review of the literature, from the perspective of the public intellectual, has identified the following tenants of Trumpian social policy, some of which have evolved or been modified slightly over the course of time, i.e., from the periods of, respectively, his pre-candidacy for President, his candidacy, and his tenure in office to date. Among the key social policy initiatives of Donald Trump are the following: instituting trade relations between the U.S. and the other nations that protect the American worker yet do not exploit workers found outside of the borders of the United States; rebuilding the decayed state of American infrastructure; stopping illegal immigration and the crime that, empirically speaking, it brings into the country, in part, through the construction of a border wall and fences between the U.S. and Mexico; determining just how much immigration into the U.S. is salutary and functional for the nation, and giving preference to legal immigrants who possess the skills that the country presently requires; reforming governmental bureaucracies (e.g., Health and Human Services, Veterans Affairs Administration) to make them more effective and efficient; increasing the number of jobs available for American citizens, primarily by cutting federal taxes and the reduction of needless and counterproductive federal regulations, and improving health care, in part, through eliminating or shrinking the scope of what its critics see as an ineffective and overly costly Obamacare program (Eric Trump in Gingrich
The Social Policy of Trump

2017: xi–xii). Yet, other Trumpian proposals would include the appointment of judges who will follow the Constitution (as compared to legislat ing from the bench), strengthening the military, addressing the national opioid crisis, trimming the federal deficit, and reforming the American mass media’s left-wing ideological bias more in the direction of truly objective reporting. Following the attempt of the Tea Party movement to revitalize the fundamental principles of the American Experiment (Varacalli 2014), a significant part of the Trump agenda is to reform the self-serving and seemingly ever-expanding nature of both public and private sphere bureaucracies. In this, President Trump, perhaps unselfconsciously, is following the analysis of the classical European thinker Roberto Michels (1949), in his critique of socialism and, derivatively, of bureaucracy in general.

Key to President Trump’s vision, for Newt Gingrich, is the attempt to “break away from a half-century of big government liberalism dating back to the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson” (2017: xvi). To agree that Trump is no far Left liberal, however, is not, at the same time, to argue that he has no appreciation for the need of many of America’s governmental institutions and voluntary associations to support the common good; he is much more a reformer of American civilization than he is a revolutionary of the political right. In no meaningful sense an advocate of the worldview of someone like Herbert Spencer (in Coser 1977: 89–127), there are nonetheless at least two instances of his social policy in which President Trump, along with mainstream conservative thought, i.e., non-libertarian conservative thought, actually supports an increase in the size of governmental institutions. These are to be found in his emphasis on the need for a strong and effective military and police force to protect America, respectively, from external and internal threats.

THE TRUMP SOCIAL POLICY IN LIGHT OF THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CULTURE WAR

As previously indicated, the social policy of President Trump involves many crucial, ethically-charged, and politically and culturally central issues that have impacted, and will continue to impact, an American civilization moving in the direction of an outright “culture war” (Hunter 1991) that threatens the social integration, or what the classical sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1965), has termed the “collective conscience” of America. Historically, American civilization has waxed and waned in terms of just how cooperative or full of conflict its general social relations can be characterized. On the one hand, there has been no historical period in America in which elements of either significant social stability
or social unrest has been absent. On the other hand, there have been eras in which one of the two tendencies dominates. For instance, the American Civil War (1861–1865) is the example, par excellence, of widespread and serious American internal conflict. On the other hand, and relatively speaking, the immediate post–World War II era up to the early 1960s, can be characterized, generally speaking, as internally peaceful. The Trump Presidency is both a cause and an effect of the current social disharmony in America. As Hunter (1991) points out, not all individuals, groups, or social movements fit neatly into the major categories of any “culture war” analysis. There is, as he observes, a “muddled middle” of those who are either ambivalent, indifferent, or radically individualistic. Close elections are often determined by which cultural-political endpoint can win over the “independents.”

In general, it is the case that the social policies of Donald J. Trump favor “soft capitalism” and the fundamental “goodness” of an organically developing American society. Core components of Trump’s support comes from the ranks of the working class, rural voters, and traditional believing Christians (Krason 2016). This is contrasted with those contemporary progressives and radicals who view American civilization and history as deeply flawed from its very beginnings and hence in urgent need of a fundamental restructuring or revolutionary transformation of its worldview, social institutions, or, simply, its essence (Krason 2012, 2003). Empirically, the advocates of the former are much more likely to be found within the ranks of the contemporary Republican Party and its allies, with those agitating for deep structural change emerging from the ranks of the present day Democratic Party and its political and cultural sympathizers.

**OPPOSITION AND QUALIFICATIONS TO TRUMPIAN SOCIAL POLICY FROM THE POLITICAL LEFT**

The lion’s share of outright opposition to the Trump agenda comes from the ranks of the extreme left of the America political spectrum. The most obvious examples of such opposition come from those organizations that are driven, variously, by the visions of Marxism/socialism, radical feminism, and politicized and utopian racial/ethnic social movements historically and originally jump-started by the presidential candidacy of George McGovern in 1972. A major contemporary example of the latter is Black Lives Matter (BLM). On the other hand, there are numerous progressive or liberal groups which stand in opposition to President Trump that operate out of organizations (e.g., the national mass media, higher education) and social movements (e.g., National Organization for Women, AFL-CIO) that, collectively, can be characterized as mainstream liberal/progressive
and stand within the continuing and evolving tradition of the coalition put together, originally, by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and continued by such figures as Lyndon Baines Johnson and Jimmy Carter.

It is important to highlight the slowly developing but clear reversal in terms of the defining status held within the Democratic Party by, variously, its utopian and mainstream wings. Simply put, starting originally with the intra-Democratic Party revolt inspired by then Democratic Senator George McGovern, it is its utopian wing that, increasingly, has been putting its stamp on the Democratic Party and the progressive movement replacing in importance the contemporary remnant of the FDR coalition. This reversal is a major factor in significant numbers of non-utopian Democrats gravitating to the Independents or Republicans, and thus represents a continuation of “leakage” from Democratic ranks of two significant components of its old-line coalition, i.e., white ethnic Catholics and white evangelical Protestants. This leakage benefitted the successful presidential candidacies of Republicans Richard M. Nixon (e.g., the “silent majority”), Ronald Reagan (“Reagan Democrats”) and, most recently, in 2016, Donald J. Trump (e.g., “the deplorables,” as coined by Hillary Clinton) and has propelled the Republican Party into a position of real competitiveness in national elections. Democratic support, for its part, increasingly has come primarily from radicalized and professional white women, ethnic and racial minorities, the homosexual community, upper middle–class youth, recent immigrants, overt secularists, the poor who are dependent on a large welfare state provided by government, and others feeling marginalized, either socially or emotionally, with respect to the post–World War II mainstream, “bourgeois” American social life up until the mid-1960s.

OPPOSITION AND QUALIFICATIONS TO TRUMPIAN SOCIAL POLICY FROM THE POLITICAL RIGHT

While the most vociferous criticism of the policies of President Trump comes from the radical left wing of the progressive movement and the Democratic Party, nonetheless it remains the case that he has many detractors within the ranks of the Republican Party establishment and, to a lesser degree, from some prominent conservative figures (e.g., national commentator George Will). Some small part of this dissent is derived from the judgement that, at times, he is vulgar in his use of language (including that which is legitimately and indisputably sexist in nature) and in the way that he characterizes crudely those who oppose him politically (whether that opposition comes from Republicans or Democrats, conservatives or progressives). However, there are deeper, more fundamental and structural reasons for the significant criticism that he has received from some conser-
vatives. The explanation for the latter can be found in the *populist message* that he loudly and persistently proclaims. Although a very wealthy individual, President Trump clearly and constantly defends the economic, status, and political interests of those who either find themselves mired at the lower ranks of the American stratification system or those who belong to the lower middle class. Simply put, President Trump’s populism has raised the ire of the more privileged in society who hold elite positions, whether in organizations devoted to business, government, education, the arts, or politics. Although certainly not an aristocrat by birth, the “new money” billionaire Donald J. Trump stands as a modern-day representative of the practice of *noblese oblige*. In terms of his standing in the Republican Party establishment, he represents to many not only a symbolic affront, but a political threat to its hitherto monopoly of power and leadership.

It must be noted, however, that the more than significant achievements of the first two years of the Trump Presidency (e.g., a deep tax cut, significant deregulation, military and police build-up) has quelled criticisms launched against him both on the part of the Republican Party leadership and among the *hoity toity* patricians of the American conservative movement. One need not have a crystal ball to predict a resurgence of criticism and expressions of glee on the part of both the elites of the Republican Party and the American conservative movement if the President or his social policies subsequently should suffer a significant reversal of fortune. If the latter were to occur, it would constitute a clear example of what the classical German philosopher and sociologist of knowledge, Max Scheler (1980), would describe as a case of *ressentiment*.

**THE SOCIAL POLICY OF DONALD J. TRUMP IN LIGHT OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT**

There is little to no evidence that Donald J. Trump is actively aware of the existence of the body of Catholic social thought and, even more so, that he applies it in his writings, speeches, or infamous tweeting. Yet one could make a reasonable case that Trump’s commonsense worldview is implicitly consistent with Catholic social thought or, at the very least, imbued with one of its less than perfect foundations, the natural law, *pagan style*.

There are more than a few examples of the, more or less, “fit” between the social policies of Donald J. Trump and the general Catholic worldview and, more specifically, Catholic social teaching, the latter discussed by Krason (2003). Some of the more important examples include: opposition to abortion (whether pragmatically grounded or not), a strong defense of religious liberty; the legitimate exercise of governmental authority and expenditures (e.g., the necessity of maintaining a strong military, welfare
assistance that helps the truly disadvantaged but does not promote dependency; subsidies for public higher education that are non-ideological and encourages, variously, literacy, independent and critical thinking, and preparation for legitimate and useful careers in society.)

DONALD J. TRUMP’S “THIRD WAY AND “VIA MEDIA”: A POSITIVE ROLE FOR AMERICAN POPULISM IN THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT

President Donald J. Trump’s social policy represents something close to a “third way” in American political thought and practice. A pragmatist in many things, he is neither a big government Democrat nor a free market Republican. Rather, he tends toward a “via media” position in most things. No socialist, he cuts taxes to promote economic growth for the benefit of all Americans. No laissez-faire capitalist, he wants to reform the marketplace by furthering a mixed economy and offering American citizens subsidies in certain vital services in the areas, for instance, of health, education, and human services. Implicitly, he an advocate of what scholars Peter L. Berger and Richard J. Neuhaus (1977) term “mediating structures,” i.e., social institutions that stand between the isolated individual and the powerful “megastructures” of the American public sphere (e.g., the state, the large corporations, the educational establishment, the national mass media). Examples of mediating structures would be the family, neighborhoods, churches, and other voluntary associations. Mediating structures, if effective, provide at least some protection for the average citizen, offering a mechanism for active involvement in America’s system of representative democracy. A system of representative democracy encourages expressions of what Catholic historian and educator Dominic Aquila refers to as a “rehabilitated populism.” Aquila contends:

Catholics cannot comfortably participate in American politics . . . so long as one conceives of the political terrain solely according to the liberal and conservative axis. But there long has been a constant populist undercurrent American politics that offers a more promising resolution to the Catholic dilemma. . . . To be sure liberals, with some measure of truth, have heaped scorn on populist racism, provincialism, and knee-jerk patriotism but their distortions have obscured populism’s more commendable features—its combination of the Left’s insistence on economic justice with the Right’s respect for tradition, moral responsibility, and the belief in the wide ownership of productive property. . . . The well-developed populist critique of the “expert class” also resonates well with (former) Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s
complaint with the revisionist theologians of this class who browbeat the faithful for their grip on tradition. “The ecclesial Magisterium,” says (former) Cardinal Ratzinger, “protects the faith of the simple, of those who do not write books, and who do not appear on television, and who do not write editorials in the newspapers: this is the democratic task. (Aquila 1992: 62–63)

The above passage of Dominic Aquila regarding his analysis of some of the ideas of Pope Benedict XVI makes clear that a purified form of populist attachment is consistent with an authentic, orthodox understanding of the vision of the Catholic religion. Donald J. Trump is no Pope Benedict XVI. It is nonetheless the case that the social policies of President Trump reflect—as imperfectly and dimly as it may be, a ray of the truth of Catholic social thought and the natural law vis-à-vis those, by and large, quite decent Trump supporters demeaned as “deplorables” by the radical secular Left in the United States.

Bibliography


