

Can America Be Changed?

The political economy, not the mythical America, is really what defines America

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If the American people ever hope to take back their country, they need to understand America's political economy so the parts of it that are morally offensive and economically ineffective can be repudiated. Only then will Americans be able to make the changes that are needed to make Lincoln's dream of a nation of the people, by the people, and for the people a reality. But unfortunately no one studies political economy as it was studied in the eighteenth century, so change has become very difficult.

During his final week in office, George Bush claimed: "There's still an enemy out there that would like to inflict damage on America – Americans. . . . The most important job [for] the next president is . . . to protect the American people from another attack." I doubt that many people who heard or read this claim noticed its subtle ambiguity. America is equated with Americans. But are the two really synonymous?

For instance, who or what was really attacked on 9/11? The most specific answer is the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. Neither separately nor both together can be equated with America. Were the people in those three buildings attacked? In a sense, I suppose they were, but who were they and how many were there? The question is almost impossible to answer accurately. Why?

In one [report](#), which is typical of many, the writer claims that, "Nearly 3,000 Americans lost their lives. . . ." This statement too is ambiguous. I suspect that more than 3,000 Americans died on 9/11, but not all of them died as a result of the airplanes that were flown into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Furthermore, the people who did die as a result of these events fall into different groups—those who were in the buildings before the planes crashed into them, and those who responded to the crashes, and all who were in the buildings before the planes crashed were not all Americans. So how many Americans in the buildings before the crashes died as a result of the crashes? Well, considerably fewer than 3,000.

How near to 3,000 is nearly 3,000? I don't know. Perhaps +/- ten? Or twenty-five? What about 50 or 100 or 500? What about almost 1,000? If you search for a list of the victims, you'll find different numbers reported.

One report cites these numbers:

Two thousand seven hundred and fifty two victims died in the attack on the World Trade Center. But 343 were firefighters and 60 were police officers, totaling 403. Although it is true that they died on 9/11 after responding to the attack, they themselves were not directly

killed by those who attacked on 9/11 which leaves 2,349 who possibly were. They were killed by the buildings' collapse.

One hundred eighty four people were killed in the attack on the Pentagon. Now the total comes to 2,532. But wait, this number includes nationals of over 70 countries, 67 of whom were British, one was Turkish, two were Irish, one was an Israeli, one was German, one was El Salvadorian, over 201 were Indians, and one was Nigerian. This comes to 275 from eight countries. But the report claims that there were victims from more than 70 countries. So there must have been at least 62 more foreign victims which brings the total of foreign victims to at least 337. Now the total number of Americans killed directly by those who attacked on 9/11 comes to 2,195. A similar analysis of another report produces the number 2,033. Neither of these numbers seems like nearly 3,000 to me, but "nearly 3,000" seems a lot more compelling than "at most 2,033" to someone trying to use a number to justify going to war. Is that why getting an accurate count is so difficult?

All of the people who were killed on 9/11 were not in the buildings that made up the World Trade Center or the Pentagon and all were not Americans. Most of the people in those buildings before the crashes were uninjured. The others who were killed were killed by the collapse of the buildings. It is doubtful that the attackers expected that to happen. After all, no skyscraper had ever before been destroyed by an airplane striking it. And when demolition experts bring down buildings, they place the explosives at the bottom, not the top. The ambiguity over who was killed how is remarkable. Propagandists love ambiguity, and almost everything we know about 9/11 is ambiguous.

But okay, say 2,000 Americans were killed by the attackers on 9/11. America then went to war and according to the Washington Post, at least 5,848 members of the American armed forces have been killed. So almost three times (2.9 times actually) more have been killed in the wars than were attacked and killed on 9/11. When I was a boy, we called this kind of situation, biting off one's nose to spite one's face.

But who were these 5,848 soldiers?

Well think about it. After all, the war is being fought to "protect the American people from another attack." To say that Americans are being protected by sending Americans off to be killed is a strange oxymoron. (Oh, I know. It happens in every war.) If Bush's claim, however, has any truth at all, the wars are being fought to protect America and not Americans. But what then is the America that is being protected? Well, consider this:

Many people think of America as a set of values, those values that America stands for. You know! "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." "[T]hat this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth." "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. . . . The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized." Every schoolboy knows these, but the Congress and the federal judiciary seem to have

forgotten them.

But wait! Lincoln knew that no nation of the people, by the people, and for the people ever existed, and what has never existed cannot perish. This view of America is pure myth, and the Congress and the courts know it. Neither can something that has never existed be protected. So this is not the America that the wars are being fought to protect. What then is?

Early in the seventeenth century, the term “political economy” was introduced by Antoine de Montchrétien when he published his *Traité de l'économie politique* in 1615. The term denoted a branch of moral philosophy which studied production, buying and selling, the distribution of national income and wealth and their relations to law, custom, and government, all of which have moral implications. Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Karl Marx considered themselves political economists. The economist, Edwin R. A. Seligman, described it nicely in 1889, “Economics is a social science, i.e., it is an ethical and therefore an historical science....It is not a natural science, and therefore not an exact or purely abstract science.” After Alfred Marshall published a textbook in 1890, the term “economics” began to replace “political economy” and the term has now disappeared from common usage in America.

But political economy differs from economics in that politics and economics are studied together, being inextricably linked. Furthermore, political economy has a strong moral component while economics does not. Today, economists like to pretend that economics can be studied independently even when they recognize that it can't. The proof is that economists fall into sects that are clearly political. We have conservative economists such as the late Milton Friedman and liberal economists such as Paul Krugman, and politicians clearly hold economic views. Although not admitting it, economists try to bend their theories in ways that make their theories and political views compatible. Furthermore what economists call laws must be enacted into law for any economy to work. Economists routinely attempt to influence government to enact laws and implement policies that are needed to make the economies that economists favor work. Economies do not work in the absence of governmental action. As distinct from political economists, economists now study merely the ways that society uses to organize the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services without taking into consideration morality or how political views affect these. Economists take their political views for granted and refuse to subject them and the economic policies that their political views generate to scrutiny. Whereas political economy deals with the relations between production, law, custom, and government in an attempt to understand how political institutions and economic practices influence each other, economists like to pretend that economic laws are not influenced by political institutions. But look at [this](#): “It is ridiculous to argue that the inequality in the U.S. is simply the result of free markets. Markets are structured by governments.”

In a sense, when considered as a descriptive activity, a nation's political economy describes exactly what a nation does, how it does it, and thus what it really stands for. The political economy of a nation can thus be compared to what it says about itself to determine if it walks a walk that matches its talk.

In short, there is no such thing as an economic system that is not defined and protected by some legal system. That's why politics and economics cannot be separated. But oddly enough, the U.S. Constitution mentions no specific economic system as Justice Holmes

recognized in *Lochner*. So how did Capitalism become the American way? Partly by accident and partly by judicial fiat.

When the English colonists came to America, they brought with them the English political and economic system, the English political economy, which was enshrined in English common law. When the nation was created in 1789, the federal courts were given the responsibility of adjudicating legal disputes between the states. The justices did so by incorporating the relevant aspects of English common law into case law. They could have used ordinary moral principles instead and fulfilled the framers' desire to "establish Justice" (found in the Constitution's preamble) but they didn't. They codified English common law into American law by means of mere judicial decree. Thus the economic aspects of English common law became the basis of the American commercial code. Furthermore, people like Lewis F. Powell Jr., who later became an associate justice of the Supreme Court, warned the Chamber of Commerce that the nation's free enterprise system was under attack. He urged the Chamber to assemble "a highly competent staff of lawyers" and retain outside counsel "of national standing and reputation" to appear before the Supreme Court and advance the interests of American business. And Robin S. Conrad, the executive vice president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's litigation unit claimed that, "Under our constitutional system, especially with an activist-minded Supreme Court, the judiciary may be the most important instrument for social, economic and political change." So throughout the nation's history, the Court has written a Capitalist economy into case law even though nothing in the Constitution required it. Yet English common law is a moral abomination; it always favored the English aristocracy.

So America's political economy consists of something like this: In addition to the makeup of the national government as described in the Constitution, it consists of the rules for how candidates are selected (mainly the laws regulating primary elections in the several states), how elections are financed, how votes are tabulated, how elected officials are paid, how each chamber in the Congress enacts legislation, how enacted legislation is enforced and adjudicated, how case law which contains the rules governing economic activity is written and enforced, how governmental agencies are related to the three Constitutional branches and are overseen, especially those agencies whose actions are kept secret, how non-governmental groups such as the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission among others are allowed to influence governmental actions, and how the Supreme Court has usurped the Constitution, and a lot more.

This political economy, not the mythical America, is really what defines America and is what the War on Terror is meant to protect. Americans were not the targets of those who attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the economic and military aspects of America's political economy were. Although most Americans don't know any of this, the President, the members of Congress, and the justices of the federal courts know it very well, and consequently they have no qualms about restricting the values America is supposed to stand for, including our Constitutional rights. General Smedley Butler was aware of all of this when he wrote, "War Is a Racket. . . . The flag follows the dollar and the soldiers follow the flag. . . . I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle-man for Big Business, for Wall Street and for the Bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism. . . . I helped make Mexico, especially Tampico, safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefits of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers in

1909-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests in 1916. In China I helped to see to it that Standard Oil went its way unmolested.” Butler understood political economy.

Legal experts have suggested that the Patriot Act erodes elements of several parts of the Bill of Rights, citing the following parts of the Constitution: the First Amendment (freedom of speech and assembly), the Fourth Amendment (freedom from unreasonable search and seizure), the Fifth Amendment (right to due process of law), the Sixth Amendment (right to speedy, public, and fair trials, right to confront accusers, and right to a criminal defense), and the Eighth Amendment (freedom from excessive and cruel and unusual punishment). Of course, passage of the Patriot Act is not the first time the government has restricted civil liberties. During every major American war, the government has imposed restrictions on civil liberties. The specified reasons have been varied, but the common aim has always been to quell dissent, to silence criticism of political decisions.

It should be obvious that wars are not fought to protect the lives of Americans, since in wars, Americans are sent to die. It should be equally obvious that wars are not fought to preserve the values enshrined in the Constitution, since in wars, those values are routinely restricted. The only alternative then is that wars are fought to preserve those institutions and practices that make up the political economy. Its preservation becomes all consuming and neither people nor the nation’s values are allowed to interfere with that goal. In short, the War on Terror is being fought to protect the *status quo* both politically and economically.

A nation’s political economy is also what makes meaningful change difficult if not impossible; meaningful change would require abandoning much of the legal system. If the American people ever hope to really be free, they need to understand America’s political economy so the parts of it that are morally offensive and economically ineffective can be identified. Only then will Americans be able to make the changes that are needed to make their country truly theirs and make Lincoln’s dream of a nation of the people, by the people , and for the people a reality. But unfortunately no one studies political economy as it was studied in the eighteenth century anymore, so change has become very difficult, very difficult indeed.

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