

Freedom, Democracy, Equality and Economic Well-Being: Hope for the Future?

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

In this holiday season, where glad tidings and thoughts of a brighter future in the year to come are the rule of practice, I will offer my own holiday tidings by submitting that there is hope for our future, as a country and as a people.

Contrary to Obama's "hope and change" tripe (which even the most ardent of Obama supporters must recognize by now as one of his greatest ruses), and contrary to the bleak view of hope as wishful thinking, I suggest that hope is a rationally-motivated projection toward the future on the basis of rudimentary and incomplete present-day evidence that leads one toward optimism.

This is optimism that certain ideas or goals are achievable that is based on signs of progression of individuals and/or culture. When one "wishes for the best goal to be reached, with a lack of evidence that there is a direction shown by the evidence, however, circumstantial, it is not hope; it is faith, since it has no evidence. Thus, my definition is contradictory to that of the pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty, who holds that hope is an unwarranted sense of longing [<http://www.american-philosophy.org/archives/>]. Contrary to Rorty, if we look at some of evidence of current ground-level movement, something is indeed shaking on the ground that makes hope warranted, in that there is some evidence for hope that we will change our fortunes for the better in the years to come, but it is not entirely justified (not yet).

1) Once the genie of freedom, equality, and economic well-being for all has been let out of the bottle, it cannot be corked, as the Egyptian revolution showed. It is always a "two steps forward, one step back" movement, of course, but that there is a growing tide of support among citizens of the world for equality of distribution is certainly clear. Despite the fact that numerous polls show that Americans remain stubbornly self-centered (for one example, see the latest widely-reported polls of U.S. citizens who believe that personal economic well-being is more important than working to stop climate change, by a 3:1 margin), worldwide, citizens of countries who have been hardest hit by the "austerity measures" of the economic elite have found their voice for equitable distribution of social goods (e.g. Greece, Portugal, and other European countries). Furthermore, organizations like the World Bank have produced recent studies that conclude that "the higher use of direct taxes tends to make the final distribution of income more equal—that is, direct taxes generally tend to be progressive," and advocate "linking fiscal policies with the concept of equality of opportunities" ("Social Spending, Distribution, and Equality of Opportunities," June, 2013). So there is change in air, but it is small and largely ignored by the mainstream media.

2) Perhaps due to the influence of the "Occupy" movement, the coming generation already seems to recognize both the elitism and the consequences of Ayn Rand-style selfishness

and individualism, and they are looking for a better philosophy, even if not committed to an alternative as of yet. Not only do I see this difference very clearly in my college students, but even Diane Ravitch has wondered aloud in her public writings whether our kids today are “the greatest generation” [see “Our Kids Today: The Greatest Generation?” in the Huffington Post, October 16, 2013: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-ravitch/education-testing_b_4109068.html]. Her reasons are different from mine, but they do fit here.

Thus, there seems to be a growing recognition among those of the younger generation who are recognizing that something is amiss and that their future may not be as positive as it has been for past generations. This entails, for many, that selfishness, as several of my students have stated it, is only a philosophy for those who “already have.” Despite all attempts by its progenitors to universalize it, it is now being reported, albeit circumstantially at this point (e.g. Democracy Now!, since pollsters generally don’t poll people who are specifically on the lower end of the economic spectrum), that people who are on the losing end of the philosophy of selfishness are starting to wake up to the fact that this alleged “virtue” is only touted by those who are already in positions of money, influence, and power.

It is no mistake that the most vocal supporters of Rand’s philosophy are people like Ron and Rand Paul and Eric Cantor. Rand Paul owns millions of dollars worth of rental property in Kentucky and Florida, and lists himself as president of a shady company called “Alchemy,” through which his income seems to flow. His dad, Ron, owns millions of dollars in stocks at 24 different companies [www.pageonekentucky.com]. Eric Cantor, for his part, has a current net worth of \$2.97 million, while his wife pulls in just under a mil with her serving on the board of corporations like Domino’s Pizza [www.therichest.com/]. With incomes like these, and with their powerful political influence, is it any wonder they are touting the virtues of selfishness, and acting so as to shield and keep their money, power, and possessions? But the rest of the country, whose economic fortunes are heading in the other direction from these Randians, recognize the post hoc nature of their philosophy of selfishness.

3) The growing movements for environmental responsibility (e.g. Keystone Pipeline; Bill McKibben’s 350.org), for minority rights, for equity in our tax structure (e.g. a significant campaign plank in deBlasio’s New York City mayoral campaign). There are many commentators who belittle these movements in American culture as superficial, as temporary (all too soon to be overcome by corporate money and power), or as “too little, too late.” But this is cynicism, and it contributes to continued lethargy and excuses not to keep pushing forward.

4) Events such as the workers of Boeing rejecting their corporate-friendly union’s embrace of a new contract shrinking their wages and benefits, and a similar movement with 54 Walmart workers being arrested in November in what organizers called the biggest act of civil disobedience by Walmart employees of all time. According to Democracy Now!, this followed a year of repeated strikes against unfair wages, poor working conditions and ongoing corporate retaliation against those who are speaking out against the retail giant. About 500 Walmart workers and supporters had gathered to protest outside L.A.’s Chinatown Walmart before sitting down in the middle of the busy street in front of the store.

5) The rebirth of reason and a reasonable ethical viewpoint among younger people shows the start of a movement away from baby-boomer Freudian psychology which reduces humans to emotional creatures and has resulted in a relativistic hedonism and surface

happiness as individual pleasure.

But there is no reason to embrace wholesale optimism, either. What hedges my optimism are concerns such as these:

1) Governments, as could be said of all institutions in general, either are never democratic (at least when they don't have to be) or that they are undemocratic in proportion to their size and/or to the extent that they have no direct accountability to the people. By "direct" I mean that the people debate and vote on the major issues of the day, such as going to war. The bottom line is that governments are not democratic unless they are made to be democratic by an ongoing press of its people. There is reason to believe that this may not happen in the wholesale involvement of the majority of Americans, given American reluctance to get involved and stay involved in such movements and pressures.

2) It takes the informed and rational consent of the governed to operate a country democratically. If the people are uninformed (either by clever concealment of leaders or by their own lack of interest, ability, and/or commitment in the operations of their government) or irrational (i.e. subject to propaganda and manipulation, in bread and circuses fashion), then democracy fails, and with it, hope for the immediate future.

The future, of course, is not guaranteed to anyone, and no one knows what it will bring. But based on some basic ground-level rumblings we are starting to see, however small they may be at the moment, there is at least circumstantial evidence that there may be better news in the years to come, and not as much of a reason as we have had recently for being too pessimistic about the future. A Happy New Year to us all.

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