

Comment on James A. Montanye's "Apotheosis of American Democracy"

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XAVIER L. SIMON

In "The Apotheosis of American Democracy" (*The Independent Review* 11, no. 1 [2007]: 5–17), James A. Montanye's characterization of some collateral predispositions of cooperation and reciprocity—and more generally of some behavioral consequences of genes—as "harmful" and as "flaws" is troubling when put forward in an essay that starts by positing an evolutionary process wherein "[s]ocieties strike initial balances, which then evolve differently to accommodate changing local circumstances" (p. 6). In developing his rationale, Montanye sometimes ignores the balancing mechanisms that form the basis of much of his argument and are mentioned in the same paragraph. Human nature is a dynamic and nonlinear complex system of interconnected elements governed by feedback, both positive and negative (in the mathematical sense). Nature, in its wisdom, continuously tries new solutions through evolution and discards those that do not fit the environment. What Montanye considers overshooting is only nature's attempt to learn by trial and error. Positive and negative feedback mechanisms balance each other, but new components are being tested and adopted all along. Trial and error, with overshooting on both sides, helps to find a new balance. The business cycle is one example of this mechanism.

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Instead of considering seemingly undesirable collateral predispositions to be harmful and flawed, we should make every effort to understand their role. Only then should we try to replace them with something better. Social scientists, however, often try to eliminate the “flaws” long before they are able to provide better substitutes. The result frequently is a new and less desirable balance that can make matters worse.

For example, development practitioners acting out of worthy and laudable motives bring new cures to countless millions of the poor only to extend their numbers, life, and misery. At the same time, they deny the poor certain solutions and technology on grounds of economic efficiency, often based on parameters from developed economies. The methodology and intent are good and highly rational, but in their application the practitioners fail to take account of local realities in all relevant dimensions.

The balance between cooperation and independent pursuits is far more complex than Montanye recognizes. It is not unlikely that cooperative hunting behaviors resulted in higher success rates for early man. Evolution thus favored those who cooperated in certain circumstances. This outcome does not negate self-interest in the subsequent distribution of the fruits; indeed, it probably favored the more selfish when the hunt was sparse. The combination of cooperation and selfishness adds to the complexity of what drives and regulates behavior.

And what about religion and democracy, soulcraft and statecraft? Over the centuries, soulcraft has provided some helpful rules that improved survival. However religiously these rules were later followed, they were initially almost certainly the result of “conscious, rational action” (p. 9). Today we Westerners rightly fear and dislike theocratic governments, and for good reason: they hold back social evolution. But what do we have to offer instead? Talk? And what about some of their still-positive influences?

Democracy as exemplified by highly fragmented free markets for ideas, solutions, and goods has proven to be a powerful mechanism for bringing about improvement. The painful evolutionary process through which the world passed in the twentieth century showed yet again that free and unfettered societies evolve better.

Poverty, terrorism, and even some acceptable but extreme forms of political action result in large measure from rigidities—tyrannies, theocracies, monopolies, bigness, certain religious practices no longer relevant, narrow or incomplete policies—that prevent societies’ natural evolution, rather than from harmful and flawed collateral predispositions. Flexible free societies develop a multiplicity of institutions that help to absorb stresses and help people to learn and practice new desirable behaviors. So why not explore why and how and in which areas democracy works, do the same for soulcraft, and then use the answers as alternatives, instead of making sweeping statements and condemning efforts to export democracy? The better we understand why and how it works and what makes sense to offer others, the more effective our efforts will be to reduce poverty and mitigate the forces that foster terrorism. The outcome of an alternative approach that includes elements of democracy will not be cookie-cut

societies, but societies that have adopted and adapted the mechanisms they find desirable, the ones they understand and are ready for. In the meantime, we can try to help complex developing societies understand the rigidities that keep them from evolving better and more rapidly and then help them to discover solutions suited to their own complex circumstance and environment, which only they can understand.

The "apotheosis of Western political systems" (p. 15) is of concern only if it is embraced to the exclusion of everything else. But let us be careful not to confuse political rhetoric and what sometimes seems like an almost religious sense of certainty with pragmatic decisions that required judgment in balancing complex trade-offs. Business 101 teaches leaders to project conviction in order to lead effectively when it is not practical to explain and debate the reasons for a decision. A leader is often wrong, but looking for ways of increasing the chances of turning what follows a decision into successful results is more profitable than bemoaning possible errors. It is preferable to continue to explore ways of further removing rigidities in parts of the world plagued by them. Aiming in the long run for the flexibility of Western political, social, and economic systems is not a bad road to travel even though it promises to be bumpy.

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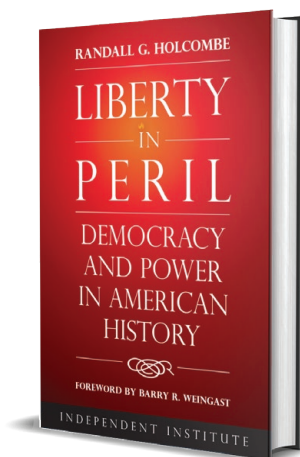
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