

THE EMERGENCE OF THE CHAOTIC CENTER

Puppies have become a major focus of late. Particularly since President Obama made the first move by stating that he was getting his girls a puppy after the presidential campaign ended. This announcement started a phalanx of suggestions of types of dogs that the public felt would fit the bill.

I once promised my own children a puppy. It had nothing to do with the White House or any such grandeur just that they wanted one. We had two young children with a third one on the way. I promised that as soon as the new baby could walk we would have that puppy. I did intend to keep my promise but things just got in the way, the third child was walking and a fourth came. It's been 25 years and all the children are walking and all are talking one with her own baby and still no puppy. I will admit that this was a broken promise but with good intentions. Things were just too chaotic...

This does not seem to be the Obama way. He seems to thrive in chaos, of which he has a lot and in this ability is a promise to the girls and to us. The promise of change. But he did add one more wrinkle to this story. He soon announced that the dog they were looking for was a shelter dog. Not a high born pedigreed one with papers. What we used to call an ally dog. The dog purists went up in smoke. Suggestions poured in. Somewhere in all this the President, who is quite a busy fellow, announced that he, the smooth, elegant youthful fellow at the center of the world stage was a "mutt". I heard no uproar here. Neither the Westminster Kennel Club nor the public made suggestions... But as an old sociologist I was quite amused.

Somewhere at the dawn of Race and Cultural Studies, there was a concept in these canons known as the Marginal Man .By any other name a mutt? The Marginal Man was seen as the human unintended consequences of the clash of civilizations beginning in the 15th century when western colonization and the age of discovery began.

From these encounters, a new type of person was born of mixed race and culture. An individual who was a product of two cultures coming together. The exploiter and the exploited. According to sociologists, this person stood in both cultures but properly was not at home in either. But they were sure that this individual could see both sides as he had to live it each day... He in fact would become the leader of the exploited group the son and or daughter of the exploiter able to negotiate and mix very easily with both.

So the President in the first few moments of his historic administration was standing in the White House about to take on the woes of America --make good on his promise to two little girls and to bring change to America by confronting the cultural wars of ethnicity, religion and same sex politics and the strangely provocative idea of universal health coverage and the minor issues of several wars in play at the same time in the mid east,---- when the global financial world came calling announcing the collapse of the financial system that had been so instrumental in the process of marginalizing huge portions of humanity around the globe. Mr. Obama should have been feeling the chaotic center converging around him. Voters wanted change, from wars of all kind, cultural and physical; at home and abroad. They were looking for a leader to integrate the margins. They instinctively knew American was going in the wrong direction. Almost every opinion poll made this clear. Americans were searching for a new way, a new kind of leadership and possibly a new take on an old society.

For mere mortals it seems too huge to fathom. The change that no one could define now had definition. After watching the hysteria of it all from puppy tales and promises to financial ruin and who prays and why we should not pray in public ceremonies, I think we have an idea, of the change we seek and quite frankly we cannot avoid.

Daniel Bell, in the *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, spells out clearly the problems we now face. Bell argues that American society is composed of the three realms, the economy, the polity, and the cultural and they are ruled by contrary axial principles. The economy and its capitalistic efficiency, the polity, its mass equality and a culture of self realization and self gratification. The result, dysfunction and the tension of conflict in western society for the past 150 years.

Bell was not the first person to call into question the tremendous contradiction of a capitalist society, a democratic republic and a mass market free speech culture. Pitirim A. Sorokin, in the *Crisis of Our Age* notes that the breakdown of American culture and the west in general could be found in the fact that the mooring of its Christian heritage was being undermined. He went so far as to say that the culture was running the risk of becoming a “sink hole” where every culture in the world is dumped in to the host culture and the center is expected to hold. According to Sorokin, this was the beginning of the unraveling of the culture. Bell too talks of this syncretism, the mixing and mingling of strange gods. V.F. Calverton however, asks a more probing question, in *The Making of Society*, why was it that he could not find the American mind? Why were Americans afraid to ask, why? But preferred to ask how we can fix it. This he knew would be the death of America as a shining source of strength and innovation. American politicians did not want to know why people committed crime, just how can we get rid of them. But now the American mind is going to be put to the test. Will we pursue the way of the usual and skip over why this economy is in free fall or just demand that the President fix it. And then we can go back to bad business as usual.

The perfect storm is occurring. We are at the point where after 500 years the idea of race as we have known it is unraveling. A black man as President of the US is a sure test that

the taboos of past racial thought are becoming undone. The very factors that gave rise to the various race theories in the first place, the economy, are falling apart and the unraveling of American culture as demonstrated in the cultural wars being waged around and among us is deep and continual.

This unraveling of the three realms has placed America at the center of chaos, where the movement of the tectonic plates of our societal structure is moving in violent convulsions. But from this chaos new ideas will arise and a new way will be found just as in a similar fashion new land is created after a volcanic eruption. Witness the great depression or the civil rights movement. The unknown here is that we are faced with historic dysfunction of all three realms at the same moment.

The chaotic center is our new frontier and will demand from us every thing. This is our moment of truth. Every thing is undone to be resurrected. How will the American mind conceive of itself? Will we ask why and how? Will we reread Adam Smith remembering to read *The Theory of Moral Sentiment*? And what the “Invisible Hand “, was to correct? We are forced to revise our perspectives on race and our relations with each other. We should envision an economy that can be sustaining for all of its citizens and the environment that makes it possible. We certainly want an economy that is free and framed by our values and ethics. And we must find a common culture not a multifaceted test of how different we all are but what we hold in common.

A select committee on Investigation of the Economic Crisis has already been called for, by Senators McCain and Dorgan, to ask why. In Emerson’s words, they are beginning the “man thinking” process putting the American mind in place to begin to understand the issue. Calverton would be proud of America at this time. This is the right thing to do. But it cannot be left to the Congress. Emerson’s, “man thinking” means freeing oneself of orthodoxy and opening oneself up to new and old but not bound by the past. This must be a public discourse carried on by the American people as thinking men and women in a free society. We must frame for ourselves this time. We must ask the why question and be prepared to formulate the fix it answers. We must make a promise to our children, our neighbors our nation and to the Congress and the President

Where is this place? It can be everywhere we gather; in factories, churches and temples and mosques, in universities and colleges, think tanks and executive suites, in foundations and in homes and yes, on Wall Street. We should take an hour each day to just think where we want to be and what we want our children to inherit. Build a web site to place our ideas on and talk to one another about this new day that must come to America. This is done, I admit, with fear and trepidation, trembling and with rage for some. But we cannot drop this on the President or the Congress to make all of this happen. He inherited the place. It just so happens that when he did the roof fell in, the electricity blew up and the front lawn developed a Grand Canyon like sink hole. We however own the joint too; it’s our inheritance as well. But there is no one in America

who does not know that we are in the chaotic center, wrestling as if our very lives depended on the outcome and it does.

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