

# **Representative Plutocracy**

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Chatham's most prominent resident, Justice Louis Brandeis, once said, "We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both." He said this at a time very much like the present. A hundred years ago, it was clear to many that the wealthy controlled everything, and reform movements spurred on by muckrakers like Upton Sinclair, resulted in some protections against the extremes of wealth: the anti-trust laws and the Sixteenth Amendment, which allows a graduated income tax. In religion, it was the time of the Social Gospel movement with Walter Rauschenbush and Universalist Clarence Skinner of Tufts.

A century later, we are again facing rule by wealth. The economist Robert Reich, former secretary of Labor under President Clinton, has just volunteered to be the next President of Common Cause, and he explains why in a blog post this week:

"Hundreds of millions of secret dollars are pouring into congressional and state races in this election cycle. The Koch brothers (whose personal fortunes grew by \$5 billion last year) appear to be behind some of it, Karl Rove has rounded up other multimillionaires to fund right-wing candidates, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is funneling corporate dollars from around the world into congressional races, and Rupert Murdoch is evidently spending heavily."

Reich warns that our government is rapidly becoming a plutocracy, a government run by and for the benefit of the wealthy.

Now if you're like me, you might not like that word plutocracy; you may have fond memories of the dog Pluto in Walt Disney cartoons or the late planet Pluto, which was probably my favorite in the solar system before it was so rudely downgraded to an asteroid a couple of years ago. Well, it turns out that the planet and the cartoon dog were named at about the same time, in 1930, but before that Pluto had been for millennia a Roman god of the underworld, brother of Neptune and Zeus, and he was the god of wealth; his name derived from the Greek Ploutos, meaning wealth.

So plutocracy is government by the wealthy, for the wealthy, and it is an apt name particularly in a government which calls itself a democracy, as our does, for when wealth actually runs things, it often does so from underground. What you see with your senses is a TV ad or a demonstration or a rally. You do not see the money that has bought that ad or has funded that

rally or demonstration. Nowadays, that money acts largely underground unless exposed by the press, as Jane Mayer did an enlightening expose of the Koch brothers in the New Yorker a few months ago<sup>1</sup>. It appears that these conservative billionaire brothers have funded a great deal of the Tea Party movement in the past year.

The political news this year is full of weird stories; Gail Collins of the New York Times has devoted two columns now to the question of which state has the weirdest political races. In Delaware you have Christine O'Donnell, who makes less than \$10,000 a year, suddenly beating a popular incumbent. In South Carolina, you have Al Greene, an unemployed veteran under a felony rap beating a respected ex-judge as the Democratic opponent to the far-right Jim DeMint, who makes Strom Thurmond look like a progressive. I have a hunch that if you could follow the money you would find that the weirdness is only on the surface, that the underground money explains everything rationally.

Now there are all kinds of reasons why the influence of money in our political system might horrify you, and many of them have little to do with religion. What I want to focus on here are the religious values at stake in this issue. This afternoon we will hear, I hope, a good secular analysis of the dangers of corporate money in elections and what we can do to undo the Supreme Court's disastrous decision last year. This morning I'm not going to talk about corporations but wealth generally, and try to suggest some religious perspectives that might help you in thinking through your own approach to it.

Let us start with our Fifth principle. If you open your hymnals to the page just past the Preface, you will see the page by which we, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote, and if you look down the list to the fifth item, you will see that we are covenanting to affirm and promote "the right of conscience and the use of democratic processes within our congregations and in society at large." Our fifth principle commits us to democracy.

Our great Unitarian Transcendentalist preacher Theodore Parker defined democracy as government of the people, by the people and for the people, a formulation that got taken up by this other fellow Lincoln and now is embroidered on the new Oval Office rug that President Obama had made up. Of the people, but the people, for the people. The question then comes up, if government is of by and for the people, who are the people? Is it everyone in the society?

It certainly didn't used to be. At various times in our history, the voting franchise has

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<sup>1</sup>"Covert Operations: The billionaire brothers who are waging a war against Obama." by Jane Mayer, New Yorker August 30, 2010.

been limited by race, by sex, by religion and by economic circumstances. All of the efforts against these restrictions were efforts to make democracy worthy of the name, to make “we the people” mean all the people. It has been an effort in which Unitarians and Universalists and UUs have been prominent.

It’s an effort Jesus would have understood very well. He lived and preached among Jews who were oppressed by having to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor as well as tithes to support the Jewish temple hierarchy, yet had no voice in their government. In response, Jesus preached and practiced a radical inclusiveness and a kingdom of heaven which was within you. Once someone showed him a coin and asked if it was lawful, that is to say, consistent with Jewish law, to pay taxes to the Emperor. Jesus said look at the coin, whose likeness do you see. The reply came, the emperor. Jesus said render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s {Luke 20:20}.

Liberation theology holds that the life, preaching and practice of Jesus, fairly considered, shows a “preferential option” for the poor. One of the passages on which this is based is in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke:

18 A certain ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 19 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 20 You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.'" 21 He replied, "I have kept all these since my youth." 22 When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 23 But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. 24 Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! 25 Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

In the kingdom of God there is no wealth or poverty, but those who have wealth in this life will be hard-pressed to enter that kingdom. In my Episcopal childhood a Sunday School teacher once explained this passage that the eye of the needle was actually one of the gates leading in to the old city of Jerusalem, and that it is so low that a camel can’t pass through when it is fully loaded. He also said that the only way the camel could pass through was by kneeling, but I have trouble envisioning a kneeling camel.

Jesus spoke to the poor and he gathered around him disciples who came from the laboring classes. The Gospel of Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount opens with this beatitude:

[Luke 6:20] Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God."

Jerusalem in Jesus' world was the center of wealth, and a large amount of wealth flowed into the temple. When he and his disciples had come to Jerusalem shortly before his execution, Jesus made this observation

[Luke 21:1] 1 He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; 2 he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3 He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 4 for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

So in sum, a reading of Jesus gives us this preferential option for the poor, and tells us that the worth of a person is not measured by her wealth; in fact wealth is a hindrance to righteousness and salvation.

Of course in the centuries that followed, it was the Christian church which replaced the Jerusalem temple as the seat of wealth and power in the society. The corruptions of wealth, the indulgences and luxuries of the Christian church, were what led to the Protestant Reformation. Luther posted his 95 theses to protest the sale of indulgences.

Both Luther and Calvin preached against the excesses of the Roman Catholic church, but the system which Calvin set in place had a perverse reversal of Jesus' preferential option for the poor. Calvin held that humanity was inherently depraved since the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. With this came Calvin's doctrine of double predestination: it was known from the beginning of time that most of these miserable sinners were going to hell, but that a certain small number, the elect, would be going to heaven. How was one to know during one's lifetime whether one was in the elect elite or the damned masses? One indicator was wealth: if you were successful in accumulating wealth, that was an indication that you were in the elect.

Note what a double whammy this doctrine holds for the poor: if you are poor you are not only suffering in this life from your poverty, but after you die you will be in torment for all eternity. This Calvinism became very deeply ingrained in the American character after our spiritual ancestors imported it into the colonies, particularly Massachusetts, and it is the source of the American idea that it is a sin to be poor, exactly the reverse of what Jesus taught.

Now, I said that the Calvinists were our spiritual ancestors, but only because the Calvinist system spawned two significant revolts against it, the Unitarians and the Universalists. Unitarians held that humanity was not inherently deprived, and Universalists held that a loving God would not condemn anyone to eternal torment.

William Ellery Channing delivered a kind of Unitarian manifesto in 1819, a sermon called “Unitarian Christianity,” which was widely reproduced and cited as a distillation of Unitarian belief. Here’s how he rejects this Calvinist doctrine of the elect:

“This [Calvinist] system also teaches, that God selects from this corrupt mass a number to be saved, and plucks them, by a special influence, from the common ruin.... By shocking, as it does, the fundamental principles of morality, and by exhibiting a severe and partial Deity, it tends strongly to pervert the moral faculty, to form a gloomy, forbidding, and servile religion, and to lead men to substitute censoriousness, bitterness, and persecution, for a tender and impartial charity.”

A severe and partial deity. Unitarianism wants no part of a god who is partial to some his her people. This expresses in a negative way a fundamental Unitarian virtue, that of disinterestedness. God’s governance must be disinterested, it treats all God’s children with love and tenderness. In our contemporary UU practice, some of us do not use the God concept, but we get to the same place by covenanting to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all persons.

This implies, to my mind at least, that a secular regime should do the same. With separation of church and state, perhaps we can’t ask a secular government to have a preferential option for the poor, but we can ask that it not have a preferential option for the rich. Yet this is what we are heading towards, or. are already there. A government of the rich, by the rich and for the rich.

Now it may shock you to learn that there is also an entrepreneurial streak in Jesus. There is the parable of the pounds [Luke 19: 11-17] where a wealthy but harsh and unpopular ruler travels abroad and leaves his wealth in the hands of his slaves by distributing a pound of money to each of ten slaves. When he returns, the first slave has invested his pound and has made ten more, and the ruler sets that one up to rule over ten cities. The second slave has invested his one pound and made five pounds, and is rewarded with rulership over five cities. The third slave hid his money in the ground, and brought back to the ruler his original pound. The ruler is incensed, and orders the crowd to take that pound and give it to the first slave, the one who has ten. The crowd feels this is an unjust result and says so. The ruler then says, “I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” For good measure, he then orders his critics slaughtered in his presence.

What are we to make of this? It is hard to read this parable as anything but an endorsement of the harshness of the free market. It certainly is at the other pole from pure redistribution expressed in the old Marxist maxim, “from each according to his abilities to each according to his needs.” And it is hard to square with a loving God who feeds the ravens and

clothes the lilies. I bring this parable to your attention, but I frankly can't fit it in to the rest of what I take Jesus to mean. Perhaps it was a late addition to the Gospel paid for by the American Enterprise Institute.

Let me turn in the time we have left to one of the persistent questions with any kind of campaign finance reform in America: what do you do with the free speech guarantee of the First Amendment? If it guarantees anything, that Amendment guarantees freedom to speak for those with whom I disagree, as it allows me the freedom to speak my disagreement. This is part of the ideal of disinterestedness.

It is also the path to truth, in liberal thinking. A liberal education is bottomed on exposure to a broad marketplace of ideas, and the critical intelligence to choose among competing ones. Our fourth principle commits us to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; one great Universalist covenant holds that the quest of truth is our sacrament. Jesus said, "you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free." [John 8:32]

The problem is that speech is not free; it is expensive. A. J. Liebling said that freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own a press. Some media coverage can be gotten for free if there is a newsworthy event, but that is at the whim of the news editors. To be effective in the political arena, speech must be purchased with money. And there's the rub. We want to limit the money coming into political campaigns, we want to free our representatives up from the necessity of spending every waking minute raising money, but we don't want to limit anyone's free speech. How do we carve up the baby?

Until last January, the Supreme Court and Congress seemed to do a pretty good job of balancing. Congress would enact election reform legislation, and the Supreme Court would strike down whatever it deemed to be a violation of the First Amendment and leave the rest. In this last go-around, they did leave the disclosure requirements in place. Someone buying an ad can be required to disclose who it is that paid for it, and Congress can require that the name be given. But in light of the lifting of corporate restrictions, this is pretty much meaningless, for all a rich person has to do is set up a nonprofit corporation with some name like A new Deal for America and buy the ads through that. The viewer never knows that the person paying for this ad decrying government regulation of the financial markets made billions of dollars in derivatives sales.

So we have religious values in favor of free speech and these are consistent with the constitutional protection. If we question the value of this, pause for a moment and think about Liu Xiaobo, the Chinese dissident who has worked tirelessly for freedom of speech and for his work is serving a 12-year jail sentence. Most Chinese will never even know he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize today. Free speech is not only an integral part of the good we take for

granted as Americans, but it is deeply woven into our religious and secular value systems. Liberals have no concept of blasphemy or sacrilege; in the religious arena as in the political, we put our faith in the proposition that the remedy for bad speech is not suppression of speech but more speech.

One answer to the conundrum of free speech versus level playing field is a system of public financing where candidates could voluntarily jump off the big-money treadmill and raise money from small donors and get matching public money. This is the scheme of the Fair Elections Now act, which I have just supported online. I have no idea whether it would pass, and the history of public financing has shown that in order to work, any scheme must give the candidates realistic incentives to take the public money. All other things being equal, the public might favor those candidates who run with public money, but other things are rarely equal. As a voter I would weigh a candidate's receipt of public money in his or her favor, but it would not necessarily cause me to vote for him or her.

In sum, our religious values call us to oppose the plutocracy, to insist that the playing field be made level again. As every person has inherent worth and dignity, every person's vote should be counted and every person's voice heard in the debates. Let me close by reminding us again of Clarence Skinner's link between the Universalist idea of God and what we want out of our secular government, and I'm going to read it as written with trust that you can de-gender the language of the last century:

"The Universalist idea of God is that of a universal, impartial, immanent spirit whose nature is love. It is the largest thought the world has ever known; it is the most revolutionary doctrine ever proclaimed; it is the most expansive hope ever dreamed. This is the God of the modern man, and the God who is in modern man. This is no tribal deity of ancient divisive civilizations, this is no God of the nation or of a chosen people; but the democratic creator of the solid, indivisible world of rich and poor, black and white, good and bad, strong and weak, Jew and Gentile, bond and free; such faith is as much a victory for the common people as was the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. It carries with it a guarantee of spiritual liberties which are precedent to outward forms of governmental action..."

Amen.

Readings

Clarence Skinner, God and democracy.

All great social problems involve theological conceptions. We may divorce church from state, but we cannot separate the idea of God from the political life of the people. So intimate is the connection between religious and social development, that the history of tribal and national evolution reveals the fact that a particular type of theology is an almost inevitable concomitant of a particular type of society. There is a constant interaction between the ideals of economic and political life, on the one hand, and ideals of God, on the other. As man (sic) attains increasing democracy, he conceives God as being more universal, more just and more intimately associated with life; and as God is conceived to be more universal, just and intimate, the idea begets more democracy among men....

The old ideas of a God who created a spiritual aristocracy, who maintained partiality, whose sympathies were not as wide as the whole of humanity, are patently inadequate to meet the new needs.... A democratic people demand a democratic God, a robust deity who likes his universe, who hungers for fellowship, whose sympathies are as broad as 'the rounded catalog, divine complete'...

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From "The Social Implications of Universalism" (1915), reprinted in Charles Howe, Ed., *The Essential Clarence Skinner* Boston: Skinner House 2005, pp 49-50.