

American Psyche:

Selected Discussions

Compiled by Jay Thomas Taber

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Introduction

Over the last five years, socially-constructed knowledge in the form of weblogs blossomed. Through this medium, many new participants began to engage in open discussions about topics related to the American psyche in transition.

In this journey to authenticity, there have been many pitfalls, one of which is the failure to recognize the importance of archiving these discussions for future reference and research. Unavoidable, I suppose, given the free-wheeling nature of millions suddenly finding their voice in self-mediated conversations with their fellow citizens, but regrettable nonetheless.

Fortunately, I managed to salvage a few of these discussions that are no longer available. I hope you find them useful.

--Jay Taber

March 8, 2008

Environmentalists

[September 2006]

Crackpot Realists and Conservation

Environmentalists love to hate big oil companies. "I told you so," we say to ourselves, as we learn about BP's leaky oil pipes in Alaska. The fiasco in Alaska could spell serious trouble for BP, as the US Congress begins hearings. It is easy to cheer them on and urge them to take drastic actions against this corporate wrong doer. We should move beyond this knee-jerk reaction.

-- Sybil Ackerman, legislative affairs director for the Oregon League of Conservation Voters, writing in the *Financial Times*.

She may be unaware that BP's malfeasance, in spite of numerous warnings to get its act together, outpaces the rest of the industry in rate of deaths at refineries. Her admonition to lesser eviling is therefore worse than the usual fatuous score card-based squawking.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

I don't really have a problem with Gaia followers and assorted animal psychics and people with all kinds of beliefs about bonding with nature. My own experiences and beliefs, in fact, tend to make me quite sympathetic to them; getting back to wild places is like going to church for me, especially in the spiritual sustenance it gives. And I share their perspective that the natural world is the real world. But I don't think these beliefs have any ground for being taken seriously in public-policy discussions, largely because I think spirituality at its core is profoundly personal. For credibility, I think, we have to turn to science and the "common sense" approach of the conservationists.

--David Neiwert in response to a comment by Spartacus, in which he was urged to show some respect for people whose religious beliefs really do include regard for preserving the environment.

I think Neiwert would be harshly critical of Ackerman's idiotic op ed, but her views are unfortunately representative of a good number of self-styled environmentalists. They're impossible to avoid in serious conservation work.

It should go without saying, but there's more to conservation than NIMBYism, aromatherapy sessions after a Sierra Club brunch and nice jobs as lobbyists. A realist might wish to at least spend some time with people whose practice of their religion has kept their immediate environment wholesome. Even if you don't share the beliefs, there is much to learn. Moreover, regard for the environment is a growing part

of the US version of Christianity. See Creation Care for details.

There are also the Wendell Berry conservatives, and the angling enthusiasts, secular and otherwise. Realism in politics often extends to strange bedfellows. This Democratic haste to position oneself as reasonable is ill-thought out. Almost everyone, with the exception of crackpot realists and ignorant lobbyists, is reasonable compared to television pet psychics and cranky gurus. There's nothing reasonable about seeing a "realistic" approach to public policy in support for BP.

posted by J Alva Scruggs

As I've written about elsewhere, fascist totalitarianism requires the assent of the populace and the collaboration of ostensible opponents. But perhaps more importantly it requires time for its perverted ideas to develop in the minds of the populace, time to follow a progression of ideas that begins with the marginalization of other ideas and the people who believe them. Once marginalization has succeeded in establishing that these other people's ideas are less valued, even dangerous, the ostracizing can proceed to step two--demonization.

Through the process of demonizing, the views and ways of life of the already marginalized become a perceived threat to those of the dominant culture. This fear, real or unfounded, then becomes the basis for step three, or, the final solution. The final solution, of course, is extermination. It doesn't have to be carried out en masse, or by government officials; it can be just as well accomplished by vigilantes. In fact, a few seemingly random assaults, arsons, malicious harassments, and murders can go a long way in silencing dissent and stemming public participation in public affairs--perhaps more so than systematic purges by the state.

The important thing to remember, though, is that the progression from marginalize to demonize to exterminate is begun by acceptance of the opinion of someone you trust, someone like you, someone who expresses beliefs you share in common. Neoliberals start unsuspecting consumers down this relay, hand them off to neoconservatives, who in turn leave them at the doorstep of fascists. The only way to stop this process of social disintegration is to nip it in the liberal bud.

Posted by Spartacus

Hippies

[September 2006]

The Weeping Hippy Narrative

I'm thinking specifically of Sybil Ackerman, Patrick Moore and David Horowitz with this, though there's certainly no end of people who engaged in a bit of activism and then saw the light. et alia and I jokingly call the wingnut marketing of their conversion stories "weeping hippy narratives". They have a target audience. They appeal to wingnuts who need to feel that actions against the vengeful god, whose son is ass whuppin' Jesus, causes terrible grief, followed by partial redemption.

The hippy is still contemptible and feckless, but at least he's made some concessions to reality. For a special bonus, pundits should write nasty things about the hippies using software fostered by this fellow. The ideal weeping hippy narrative should be maudlin, disturbingly Freudian and vastly hypocritical.

David Horowitz has set the bar very high, but there are other avenues and all of them are fecund. Moore has parlayed his time with Greenpeace into advocacy for nuclear power which, if he reads the financial papers, he must know can't be built without massive subsidies and state curtailment of liability. The problems with decommissioning and waste disposal remain unsolved. But neoliberal versions of the free market never required anything remotely like a free market. Ackerman warns her fellow hippies about the error of pursuing a "vendetta" against BP, which has ignored all the warnings it was given about safety and leads the industry in refinery worker deaths. In a few years, she'll be ready to quit her work with the League of Conservation voters and write an op ed detailing her disillusionment with the environmental movement.

T.V. nailed the production number in this comment, emphasis mine:

I used to think that liberalism was essentially contractual and therefore adult, a system in which one made rational alliances with people for rational ends, despite feelings about their hair or lifestyle or vibration. The last few years have revealed it to be an infantilized, Oedipal dreamstate in which the goal is to reconcile with Mummy and Daddy and brother and sister, who are fascist wingers but who always have a heart of gold. It's like that with the nation, too: we're a national family, and everybody has a role. No matter how ugly they talk, Mummy and Daddy will always melt if we are firm and loving with them. And we know how to handle the punked-out "radical" brother or sister, whose moral rigidity is always just an irritating adolescent phase of preening "purity" that should met with cold, disapproving shunning; after being ostracized for a decade,

they'll grow up, or they'll be the black sheep. These are simple, timeless roles, as in vaudeville, and we always comfortably know just where we are. The fact that this discourse flows so thickly and irremediably at the site of a guy who looked into the abyss a few years ago and didn't hesitate to call what he saw 'fascism' pretty much underscores just how culturally fucked we really are.

There it is. Some of those who don't "grow up" eventually go mad from the ostracism and more than few face a cat food dinner retirement. The forward thinking have a valuable lesson to teach: when you reach a position of prominence, be ready for an abrupt volte face. Lay the groundwork early on, if at all possible. It will help get you plenty of career.

posted by J Alva Scruggs

It's all very obvious if you grew up in a fundamentalist (I refuse to use their new cuddly phrasing of 'evangelical') church.

No preacher is more popular with the hoi polloi than the one who used to do the drinkin' and fightin' and other things with dropped 'g's.

Why we are ruled by people who sincerely believe things that should have them strapped to a bed on heavy doses of Thorazine in a civilized world is beyond me. Most of the people reading those godawful Last Times books really believe that they're true. At least the ones I know. Demons and angels and antichrists oh my!

Posted by winna

As you observe, marginilization is an essential aspect of the ongoing psychological warfare between destroyers and creators.

Posted by Spartacus

Winn, the belief appears to diminish the higher up the food chain you go. I know the bedrock angry people, who live on vengeance fantasies and dream of a day when they'll be an elite. I also know the cynical manipulators, who turn the belief on and off as needed. I joke about it sometimes, but a society that felt treating tooth decay was worthwhile would have a lot fewer vengeful fantasists.

Spartacus, I hope some day to find a way to convince the nice liberals to stop rescuing vicious, cynical pundits.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

A disturbing incident I recall from the 1980s was listening to an otherwise kind neighbor deriding hippie culture, peace and love, before his young children.

Posted by Spartacus

Disappointment in promise unfulfilled, the influx of cynical opportunists seeking to monetize the culture and no small amount of propaganda went into the mood of anger in the eighties. I fell for it myself, even though there were grounds for me to know better.

What I didn't understand well at the time was that authoritarians teach a lesson of self-loathing, in every way they can. They isolate people and uproot them. They belittle them through the media and recruit shills, who will affect the "look and feel" of a culture.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

authoritarians teach a lesson of self-loathing, in every way they can

It's the application of THE principal tenet of marketing - tell them and show them how they should be dissatisfied with their lives - to every aspect of life and living. Then, the authoritarians say "look at us, we are in control of our lives", so therefore you should let us help you manage yours. Which is why I return always to Fromm's "Escape from Freedom", from the mid-60's wherein he nailed, early, the rise and now almost complete dominance in the USA (and/or Western societies) of what he called "the marketing personality". Somewhat prophetic, I think.

Posted by Jon Husband

Overheard:

HE: What was that about?

OTHER: Our neighbors don't trust us. I guess we're kind of like hippies to them. They think we do drugs.

HE: But we do do drugs.

OTHER: And we're pathetic hippies to boot. We like our comfort too much.

Posted by Phil Anthropoid

Most of the hippies I've known have been fairly abstemious, but if you're already doing drugs we'll be chasing the dragon behind the Dumpster as soon as the Tutor has passed out. Drop on by. The more the merrier, I always say.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

I hate to see old wipping heepies die, so I will throw this in. Some Congressman on CNN says yesterday, from the floor of Congress, "You cannot deal with terrorists in Bergenstocks." I think he meant Birkenstocks, and I don't think he meant that terrorists carry their sandy footprints on their soles, but there he was, saying it, on the floor of Congress. It's enough to make a heepie wip. Idn't it?

Posted by ahfukit

The first hippy I knew had the scars of taking a machine gun burst across his chest and abdomen, from his service in the Korean War. The honorable dildo from whatever state needs to scrape the dogshit out of his ears and quit thinking of hippies as his party friends from the days he was wasting his parents' money at college.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

The hippies I hung with started housing trusts, consumer cooperatives, and community gardens so poor people -- no matter what creed -- could pay rent and still eat. Is that grounds for bringing them up before HUAC?

Posted by Spartacus

It's still part of the narrative to hold hippies responsible for losing the Vietnam war. That sits in uneasy juxtaposition with the claims that we actually won. I seriously consider the wailing of the wingnuts over hippy this and hippy that to be a species of self-loathing guilt.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

Killing Culture

[June 2006.]

The economics of graduate education are messy. Education is paid for by the government, the parents, various foundations and endowments, by the students themselves (in part by their low-paid labor), and by the undergraduate students and their funders. The beneficiaries are the faculty, the researchers, and the students themselves. One of the peculiarities of humanities graduate schools is that their main products are of interest only to themselves: new humanities research and new PhD's.

But the new PhD's, while potential beneficiaries of the PhD monopoly of college teaching jobs, are also effectively competing with their teachers for whatever jobs there are. This leads to tension when grad students and adjunct PhD's notice that some tenured faculty are either over the hill, or else are using their jobs mostly to finance a nice lifestyle while doing only the minimal research required to keep their jobs. (For some, scholarship is the reason they went into the profession; for others, it is just the price you have to pay for a cushy job).

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

I've written previously about my difficulties with the gatekeepers of academia in my pursuit of doctoral work and faculty positions. In these earlier posts, I mostly focused on the apparent non-compliance factor in my rejections: having considerable experience, recognition, and acclaimed publications to my credit actually worked against me.

What I overlooked, though, was the age barrier. I'm only 53.

But in a recent conversation with another highly creative intellectual -- who just happens to have been rejected at the same institution where I did my graduate studies -- I discovered that over 50 is indeed considered a liability there, not because of diminished energy or brilliance, but because it conflicts with the college's marketing brand of being young and hip.

Posted by Spartacus

I can't count anymore the number of people I know who should be and could be teaching, who are hanging in there under pressure, and who were driven out or pushed aside. Back when getting a formal education was an option for me, I had a friend who was hired at a great place to work, a sweet architectural design firm, with a degree in philosophy. His employer, he said, wanted someone with an education, who could also still think. I was young enough to be blown away by that.

It's not just academia, either.

Several years ago, a wealthy Bostonian became interested in the problem of drug addiction. A foundation colleague helped introduce him to a well respected drug counseling and treatment center. The wealthy gentleman was impressed with its work, so he decided to make a large donation to the organization. My colleague was taken aback when the donor stipulated that his gift not be used for salaries and other "overhead" expenses. Not knowing how else to respond, she told the donor that drug counseling and treatment are salaries and overhead expenses.

Compare this process to the way the wingnut borg is handling the building of its culture. Phil at the Gift Hub has mentioned many times the process of funding and hiring that makes an intellectual/propaganda network possible. It is taking over the philosophically liberal structures where an education is increasingly difficult, but still possible. The obsessive monetization turns learning into a race to the bottom for acquiring qualifications and place, with a harshly limited outlook for being able to pursue it full time. Able people start to look elsewhere, and acquire skills, which is not necessarily a bad thing, but they are not going to be replaced by people who have decades of experience and the teaching they can still manage is impromptu. I read a lot of blogs that are a close equivalent to hedge schools, published by people who have everything it takes to teach, except for a marketable quality.

posted by J Alva Scruggs

For those who might ask what's the big deal?, I refer you to the right-wing coup of the Southern Baptist Convention and its extensive assets. University and government treasuries are no less formidable when deployed in the cause of fundamentalism now merged with organized crime.

Posted by Spartacus

In talks with right wing religious people, I've found that they're often quite upbeat, even happy, and that being part of something with some very clear precepts has made them enthusiastic about sharing the good news. They have apocalyptic ups and downs, but those are generally fairly shallow. Only the deeply damaged are obsessive, and they come to dominate because they have what it takes to wage attrition through unreasonableness. Eventually, it's easier to let them have their way. They're not especially grand manipulators. Just persistent.

Quite a few of the religious righties I've spoken to are not suffering from a false consciousness in any way. Things I consider terrible sacrifices are worthwhile trade-offs for them. They were very, very unhappy. Now they're not. The bullying wingnut cretins are

a minority, who drag them into rotten activities through peer pressure, relentless unpleasantness and the cheap thrill of getting away with being a jerk.

Kurt Vonnegut wrote about psychopathic personalities whose decisiveness is unhampered by empathy or considerations of decency. That state of mind is very attractive to people who are unhappy. I've felt that way myself: if only I were free of thinking I'm a jerk for doing X, Y or Z. Then I could be effective. I can say I would pass on the promise of that, and support in my efforts to achieve it, because I tried it once and couldn't hack it. A little voice in me cried, "bullshit", and I couldn't drown it with drugs, liquor or anything else. The pitch I got was: come, let us be uncertain and struggle together. It appealed to me because I had all these nagging doubts and wanted company. The certainties of it were veiled. They were, as I alluded in the previous post, a test of my willingness to go along. That's the big step.

I find my community now among the rejectionists, the pariahs, the endlessly fucked over and the people who are scared of being fucked over again. Membership in that is not a lot to offer people.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

I don't know. I had a neighbor whose exuberant dogs I walked in junior high who would have probably qualified as one of those upbeat Christian types. Once I was present for a theological conversation between her and her husband. I think it had to do with a local church whose minister was letting the parishioners perform baptisms on themselves rather than presiding Dadlike over the ritual himself.

Neighbor lady was taken aback by this anarchy. Husband, marginally more sympathetic, said it could be seen as "the priesthood of all believers," solid Protestant-citizen material, you know. In the end the neighbor lady expressed her skepticism about such interpretative license by shrugging that she supposed it was an instance of "the fires burning hotter."

What she meant by this -- I know because I'd heard her say it before -- was that the ambiguity of the doctrine was a deliberate test set out by God, a kind of bait or entrapment, and if the mark interpreted incorrectly, he would suffer all the more howlingly in hell to have been so close, as it were, to have been so lucky to have had the correct answer there in his vicinity but to have missed it nonetheless.

The whole of my objection to the desert religions rests in that anecdote. I think the woman who said it would have counted as one of the "moderates," one of the upbeat and not obviously sociopathic exemplars of the faith. But the violent, infantilized authoritarianism and cruelty is so deeply inbred in Christianity that

I'm very skeptical that even the "nice" ones escape being fundamentally shaped by it. Here's a woman who looks at the people sitting next to her at the PTA, or selling her groceries, and she can serenely contemplate them screaming in torture forever over a trivial point of doctrine -- not just that, but triumph that they got tricked.

Pawned by God! And it's active torture we're talking about, forever. I heard a lot of stuff like that growing up -- it was so normalized that even long after I was an atheist it didn't dawn on me for years just how morally abject, how grotesque and inhuman that vision really is. Yet if you subtract from Christianity all the people who would reject the doctrine of hell, I'm not sure who that leaves you with besides a few freethinking Episcopalians and Unitarians and a gaggle of assorted New Agers.

Upbeat good cheer and intratribal hugginess is compatible with unspeakable cruelty and casual, utterly inhuman retractions of fellow feeling -- not just for strangers and others but for the people one sees or works with every day. For that reason the anecdote also expresses the whole of my objection to the authentic happiness crowd, who are a secularized version of the same anti-ethical form of life.

Posted by T.V.

T.V., the satisfaction the doctrinally correct get from the thought of others suffering seems less religiously based to me than it does class based. Secular wingnuts of that class like torture too, and in this world. I do think the desert religions lend themselves very well to infantilized authoritarianism, but I've seen the same gloating in people of other faiths. What they had in common was frustrated, and sometimes insatiable, managerial ambitions. I think a good bit of religion is ginned up to meet that desire, in much the same way as crank philosophy. It provides a respectable cover. It's something that can get space on the NY Times op ed page.

I went a little batshit after the Abu Ghraib story broke and I found secular liberals solemnly discussing the morality of torture. Perhaps they've never hurt anyone or been hurt, but the ghoulishness of deciding how much and what kinds of torture are acceptable, from the lofty abstraction of blogs and published journals, seems an awful lot like the satisfaction of the fires burning hotter woman. I had expected more than revulsion followed by, "yes. . . but. . ." So not quite as overt and not quite filled with false piety, but the abdication to a remote force that would handle it without making their nice houses messy was still there.

There's a different quality to the sadism of the doctrinally correct than the incoherent hatred of the less well-schooled. It takes a college experience - I hesitate to say education -- to give someone

the ammo to be an adept cretin. Some of this is class based. The upbeat people among my formerly completely broken religious righties refuse to think about ugly or cruel consequences. They do a weird shift if they absolutely have no choice but to see it. They cope with screaming fits, breaking things, looks of profound shock and tears, followed by accusations of being hated by the people who have forced them to look. Dobson and his fellow travelers make a pretty penny conditioning them into being able to do it themselves.

In the absence of religion, wingnuts and managerial ghouls, nominally liberal or pseudocon, still look for that element of personal sanctity that makes hurting others acceptable and even a pleasurable duty, provided they don't have to get too dirty themselves. Social Darwinism works for the secular. Religion looks more like a tool for something to me than a cause. The culture of limitless control is my culprit.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

T.V., that's why I find the image of Jehovah as a thoroughly damaged, warped, even evil fragment of the true godhead so...appealing. The apologists have never successfully answered the Question of Evil if they assume that Jehovah is somehow pure and good. So...what if he is not, what if he is a mad, gibbering, flawed piece of a greater deity? Gnosticism does have a lot of craziness associated with it, but not as much as orthodoxy, imo.

Posted by Brian Miller

Mr. Scruggs, a worthy essay, One of my favorite "other" blogs is the relentlessly secular Butterflies and Wheels. I think, frankly, they lose site of the very reality you summarize so well. A link to your post will be worthwhile, tomorrow, methinks.

Posted by Brian Miller

Hi there Mr. Miller. I'm not completely convinced that my cultural culprit is not a product of the Christian culture. It's hard to disentangle, as religion is also very much a means of governance and a philosophy of governance. It's incredibly useful to be able to say He said.

Hmmm. What I'm groping towards is saying I still have a chicken and egg problem.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

Further thoughts on this. Younger people's intellects are easier to weaponize, both students and instructors. Militarization runs deep in our society. Hence the disdain for Spartacus, among others, who are too old, too individuated and too rounded to be comfortable

turning out hyper-specialized students.

Desert religions evolved alongside a constant flux of uncertainty, famine, war and forced migrations. A lot of the efforts at ethical thinking in the literature concerns the proper use of violence, control hierarchies, duties and massive cruelty. Religion gets adapted to meet people's needs at the time.

Schisms are constants as are evolving interpretations within the orthodoxy. The happy camping religion of broken people is not the same as the punitive hellfire of the doctrinally correct managerial class, even though they're both called Christian. They're both different from the free thinking Episcopalians, whose ways and thoughts are very much in line with social democracy.

The psychopyrotechnical goo of the Zizek devotees provides a different kind of social function for cover. I've been invited to view it as a symptom, but it's really just a manifestation of a desire to be an asshole in a respectable way. Assertive victimology and a right to provocation have no place in the freethinking religions.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

I don't think Jehovah is even a fragment of the true godhead, although there are regions in which whole groups of people have miniaturized things around such a thought, which is not very bright because they also think it's a large and comprehensive thing (even). The aim should be to get all the way away from 'true godhead,' including forgetting about the 'true Christianity' or the 'true [any] religion, because those flute notes from Arjuna to Krishna were few in number—they were probably just some nobleman playing the flute for somebody else, and a scribe made up the story--still sold in Hare Krishna stalls the world over! Then your cultural culprits might have bolder outlines--like the closing of the Kilgore classical music station in favour of selling to shit Christian-pop bullshit as reported in NYTimes today.

That niceness of the moderate Christians who aren't full-time hateful is the trickiest of all. Thanks for the warning, as I need to have this as a kind of re-indoc thing at least weekly, because I have to deal with some of these and they are sore afraid that they might not overturn me. It may also be important, if we talk about sadists enjoying suffering, to be able to learn how to enjoy watching sadists suffer. I really don't think there is any choice. This could be circular, but it could also be a way of keeping the juices flowing--doesn't matter about the critique about hypocrisy that will be inevitable from the put-upon now-powerless neocons, just so long as they're penned up.

Posted by new york pervert

Mr. NYP, the critique of the neocons I'm going with for now is that they hit the jackpot at a time when there was a need for their brand of snake oil aggression. The need looks likely to shift to the Kristof and Tom Friedman brand next. The desire for aggression hasn't gone away. It does need better branding. The genius, such as it is, of the DLC types lies in peddling a warmed over version of Papa Doc Bush's kinder, gentler aggression. I have no doubt it will eventually sell well.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

Mr. Scruggs, I love your writing. "kindler, gentler aggression indeed." Why invade a country when a few infusions of cash and targeted "removals" can do? What too many forget is the murders and genocides committed by our oh so kind and gentle Democratic Party. I'm sure the Serb villagers driven out of their ancestral homes by KLA Criminal Syndicates are forgiving of the Great Empathizer's little bombing war of liberation in the Balkans. At least there was some competence, less outright looting, involved, no?

Posted by Brian Miller

I was merely alluding to the opportunistic nature of the merger between these two inbred lineages of American conservatism. The all-out culture war that resulted from this arranged marriage has plenty of fuel, but needs to consolidate its shallow ideological gains by ousting all opposition. Theocracy cannot abide academic freedom, only the pretense of it.

Posted by Spartacus

'What too many forget is the murders and genocides committed by our oh so kind and gentle Democratic Party.' Then they should shut up talking about how wonderful Bill Clinton was--even if he was. I don't think anybody thinks the Democratic Party is 'kind and gentle' and I don't think anybody is kind and gentle--just look at saints, they're all sadists too. Aggression is all right, one needs a subtler narrative to combat inertia, except when inertia suffices (I like it for brief periods of each day.)

Posted by new york pervert

Or rather, I shouldn't say 'aggression is all right,' but it is not going to always suffice as the 'first theme' of everything. People have tried it and it has never worked, because everybody is aggressive.

Posted by new york pervert

Fair point, Mr. NYP. It seems like too much trouble to say "unprovoked aggression as constant policy", but that's what it should have been.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

I missed your second comment until just now, Spartacus. I agree with the conclusions.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

J:

I think your class-first argument is mostly compelling. Religion at its worst does seem to follow fractures of class or race that would have been played out even without supernatural justifications. I think where I balk is at the stories for the children. If you imagine a safe and settled culture, free of the sedimented strife that would train up kids in obviously grotesque hatreds, and imagine the kids imbibing the usual Sunday school tales...well, I think the themes of raw, groveling authoritarian submission & grandiose S&M power relations are far worse than the militarized kid's-channel TV stuff I try unsuccessfully to keep my son from being immersed in, and I think they could twist people who would otherwise be untrained in social cruelties into accepting them as justified.

They're not like reading Harry Potter, or the original rather nasty Grimm's tales, either, because kids who imbibe those tales are told that they're real. That's a crucial categorical distinction for kids. Nathan asks that all the time. Is magic real? Are dinosaurs real? Is a laser real? Is heaven real? As Brian says, Jehovah deserves to be treated precisely as the Gnostics treated him, as a crazed megalomaniac villain on Power Rangers. Teaching kids to bow down before that is horrible, and I confess I think there's a connection between such early training and something like Abu Ghraib even if I can't prove it sociologically.

While one can make a very plausible case that cruelty would run our monkey world with or without religion, I think one can also make a case that religion is the originary source of the implant that makes it possible for gentle people who would otherwise be appalled by torture to consider it thinkable, even acceptable, if carried out by the proper authorities. If I had to choose between kid's books about suffocating giant mother squirrels and books in which the entire human race is drowned out of spite and prophets who call down murderous bears on children for laughing at them, I'd choose the former while holding out for something better than either of these Hobson's choices.

Posted by T.V.

TV: I just want to say "excellent." I think Arthur Silber has an excellent series of articles summarizing how our child-rearing practices, including "religion" lead to the very cruelties and corruptions we see throughout history.
(powerofnarrative.blogspot)

Posted by Brian Miller

Jesus, with the children at his knees, was not talking of hell burning hotter; he was talking about humility, kindness, and mildness. The Gospels, I truly think, are the best source for many of the anti-Pharissical sentiments expressed on this blog. Being "anti-Christian" is not a great stance for winning hearts and minds in the heartland. But reading the Gospels might be.

Posted by Tutor

Read the passage in context, liberal. It was after the Pharisees were trying to trip up the Lord on matters of divorce and physical relations between a man and woman. It's clear as day the gospel is showing us that abortion is wrong. Anything else is fancy city talk.

Try that sort of thing in the church were I worship and we'll show you the chains, liberal. And then you'll weep—but I won't. I'm forgiven.

Posted by Captain Blowtorch

Liberalism

[August 2006.]

The video I put up is the product of years of frustration over progressive claims to support a kind of liberalism that itself has been mythologized. There has never been a golden age. There have been sporadic successes of democratic social movements, which were all bitterly opposed until the party structure saw no alternative but to make some concessions. The cries of "take back the party" or "take back the country" are the fatuous bleatings of angry consumers, who nevertheless show up at the "point of sale" and hand over everything they've got without doing a thing to ensure reciprocity. Even the degenerate barter method of social contracts demands better than that.

The alpha consumers -- Daily Kos, Firedoglake, Stirling Newberry, Steve Gilliard . . . inter alia -- buy into the trickle down theory of political power. They want to elect Democrats who will then supposedly enact the reforms they claim to support. This is the exact reverse of the way things work. The social movement comes first. The politician is granted a conditional opportunity to put things into law.

The trickle down activism of alpha consumers ensures an endless parade of careerist triangulators, whose accommodation to "reality" is to put the success of their campaigns first, by any means that won't get them sent to prison. I use the terminology of a cynical, rigged marketplace because that is the most accurate for what they have built. When the product they receive is a lemon, they get irate at the very people who yelled at them for walking into a shuck.

I could be nicer about my characterizations, and I have been. In response, I've gotten large doses of condescending hogwash and the petulant trolling of people who handle buyer's remorse with temper tantrums. Frustrated ridicule is all I have left!

When progressives are ready to get back to this little planet the rest of us call earth, and knock off the brand management triangulation, we might be able to have a conversation.

posted by J Alva Scruggs

You might be interested in the liberal apologist series written by *Orcinus'* guest blogger Sara Robinson--classic neo-liberal arguments for surrendering our republic to fascism. If you can stomach it, it's actually instructive to read the comments by these delusional people to understand their fantasies about democracy.

Posted by Spartacus

I did get through two of them. I really couldn't bear it. It reminded

me of talks with a friend, very bright fellow, far more erudite than me, who had found peace of mind through becoming a devotee of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. The structure he built for looking at the world was seamless and impenetrable. The neoliberals come very close to that.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

So true. The regular crowd at *Orcinus* is almost like a cult. I wouldn't bother, except my colleague Dave Neiwert is a renowned blogger, and I suspect we might reach some lurkers and thus inoculate them against these toxic ideas. I've also met potential recruits there.

Posted by Spartacus

I neglected to mention that in her latest installment she marginalizes the Far Left (those who risked their lives in the Civil Rights Movement) and extols those who worship racist warmongers like Richard Nixon, Billy Graham, and Teddy Roosevelt. Needless to say, I am not inclined toward mercy when she claims to be a scholar of humanities.

Posted by Spartacus

I read the comments on the last post over there. You attracted the attention of a neoliberal wingnut, who marginalized you without apparently reading more than a few words of what you wrote. He also seems to be under the impression that the liberals he listed drive policy. The odds are high he voted for people who did their best to undermine and negate the influence of Conyers, Kucinich, Waters et al.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

I used to think that liberalism was essentially contractual and therefore adult, a system in which one made rational alliances with people for rational ends, despite feelings about their hair or lifestyle or vibration. The last few years have revealed it to be an infantilized, Oedipal dreamstate in which the goal is to reconcile with Mummy and Daddy and brother and sister, who are fascist wingers but who always have a heart of gold.

It's like that with the nation, too: we're a national family, and everybody has a role. No matter how ugly they talk, Mummy and Daddy will always melt if we are firm and loving with them. And we know how to handle the punked-out "radical" brother or sister, whose moral rigidity is always just an irritating adolescent phase of preening "purity" that should met with cold, disapproving shunning; after being ostracized for a decade, they'll grow up, or they'll be the black sheep. These are simple, timeless roles, as in vaudeville, and we always comfortably know just where we are.

The fact that this discourse flows so thickly and irremediably at the site of a guy who looked into the abyss a few years ago and didn't hesitate to call what he saw 'fascism' pretty much underscores just how culturally fucked we really are.

Posted by T. V.

I was going to make a post of this, but it serves better as a follow up to your comment.

A Brief Guide

Liberals think the state can and should have a positive role to play in the lives of the people who live in it. Dennis Kucinich is a liberal.

Corporate liberals think the state, and state supported private enterprise, can and should have a positive role to play in the lives of the people who live in it. Russ Feingold is a corporate liberal.

Neoliberals are corporate liberals who have come to believe that the state and state supported private enterprise will somehow bring about a free market which will have a positive, governing role to play in people's lives, wherever they live. Some of them believe state supported religion should be included in governance too. It can all be well managed, provided people are incentivized properly to cooperate. Hillary Clinton is a neoliberal.

Fascists believe people can and should have a positive role to play in the lives of the state, state supported private enterprise and state supported religion, which they will run. George Allen is a fascist.

Liberals and, to a lesser extent, corporate liberals think some strong checks are necessary on any concentration of power, and that these checks can be made functional within the state. Neoliberals believe the checks will come into being, through better management and passive coercion. Fascists believe the strongest possible checks are needed on the people, to ensure they play positive roles in the state.

Liberals are a tiny, tiny minority of the population and some of them are Democrats. That doesn't make Democrats liberals. The majority of Democrats are neoliberals, with a few fossil corporate liberals trying to puzzle things out. That debased form of liberalism is how they plan to govern. Democratic apologetics based on neoliberalism being "less evil" overlook something important. Fascism doesn't come into being without active assistance.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

Appreciate your eloquent clarity on this J. Alva. In an earlier recommendation at the referenced liberal weblog, I observed that bedrock indigenous nations and peoples have a useful perspective that has been all but ignored, and even offered an audio interview link to introduce this audience to a different point of view. Sadly, they ignored my suggestion, and went on to belabor how ignorant everyone is compared to themselves, noting that with greater focus on the use of deceptive devices, we'll eventually all be fooled into supporting the neoliberal agenda.

Posted by Spartacus

Thanks, Spartacus. It may sound cranky and conservative, but I think neoliberals have an aversion to work, with an affinity for busyness.

I've been following the trade squabble news. The negotiators produced a great deal of bad faith posturing, especially those from the wealthier nations, and went to extreme lengths to ensure their proposals were wholly unacceptable, even to people anxious to sell out the people of their countries. It became apparent to even the most gullible journalists that the US negotiator wanted a failure, to protect the status quo. It reminded me a great deal of the way Democrats treat their constituents. Squaring that abuse with a vision of managerial competence leaves no room for learning about perspectives that have more relevance to their situation. They're all wrapped up in that inane, Machiavel-lite branding effort.

Posted by J. Alva Scruggs

I suspect there is something about the faith in human progress through such human inventions as science that allows people who call themselves progressives to actually believe their understanding of reality is superior to that of intact indigenous societies. How else could they make remarks like "there is no place in public policy for beliefs about spiritual relationships between species."

Posted by Spartacus

Jay Taber -- recipient of the *Defender of Democracy* award -- is an author, columnist, and associate editor of *Fourth World Journal*. <http://www.lulu.com/spartacus>