

Electing Self-Interest

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Introduction: Identifying Primary Motivation

For what do you vote?

Me too!

How can anyone not, I ask you, vote for self-interest?

Of course there are as many versions of (perceived) self-interest as there are voters. But, nevertheless, at the extremes, we find two basic drives: “for me, NOW!”, personal, short-term, proximate self-interest; and, for the greater good of the whole, for generations to come, our children, our world: universal, long-term, ultimate self-interest.

Accepted, the above does nothing to address or contextualise the strains and pressures or economic and strategic considerations of our twenty-first century world, but if we do not address primary motivation we become reduced to discussing how people *should* vote, depending upon intellectual arguments and economic/geostrategic preferences, rather than actuality.

Motivation lies at the heart of every action, every decision, every choice, but by what are we motivated?

If we are considering hearts and minds, at least historically, the simple answer is family and reason/God(s). Nowhere across humanity do people exist without family. As Rousseau observes in *Du Contrat Social*², the family is the primary political unit. That is not to pass judgement or opinion on how said units are constructed or formulated, merely to acknowledge their universality across the species. And, that transgressing social convention of one's particular family, culture or ideology (at least historically) was considered a terrible crime, punishable by death, banishment, even the label of insanity.

Since God's naming, hierarchical authority has claimed their validation through God. Indeed, if we drop the pejorative term, God, and substitute it with 'Truth', we can then include *all* gods in *all* guises: science, reason, capitalism, communism... and, as such, recognise at the birth of structured

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) *Du Contrat social ou Principes du droit politique*

society, those whose grasp of Truth appeared most astute were necessarily empowered with leadership and shaping direction.

So was the order of things from the birth of structured society, and given one's vulnerability alone in nature, to all but the most wayward and disturbed, it served self-interest, both proximate and ultimate to support/submit to order.

Hobbling Ultimate Self-Interest

With democracy we find the dispersion of power amongst the populace. Initially such responsibility was shared by the wealthy and powerful: slaves and women, for example, were not considered part of the demos in Ancient Greece.

Modern day representative democracies begin to emerge as the European Enlightenment gathered pace and the British were overthrown in North America. With the introduction of secret ballots in the nineteenth century and universal suffrage (or, more accurately, national suffrage) becoming the accepted norm during the twentieth century we arrive at, as a general rule, the shape of modern democracy. Where, in secret, everyone above a certain age, no matter how disenfranchised, foolish, unstable, wicked... is given the opportunity to vote for perceived self-interest: or, for an individual or party to represent their self-interest.

One must at this point recognise the ideology, supranational bodies and international agreements to which our representative democracies are bound and subject. For, whilst theoretically empowering the populace with decisions over meaning and direction, as things stand, and for the foreseeable future, certain understandings are not subject to question. In effect, foundations, Truth beyond question, established through history, which, while having no ethical validity, serve those with power, over those who seek it or those who would see it shared. This is not to say one position or another is correct, merely to observe the arbitrariness of what has become established as Truth.

Ownership, material and intellectual, has become so ingrained as a concept that it is never seriously questioned. Yet the concept of land ownership was inconceivable to most indigenous peoples before Europeanisation and its imposition across the world was perpetrated through violence. As violence holds no ethical validity, neither can its results. Rousseau argues in his 'discourse on the origins of

inequality'³, that the first person to stake out land and claim ownership was an impostor, and if one is looking for an ethical foundation upon which to build the debate, it can hardly be considered closed. As indeed echoes the intellectual property debate, where protecting and hiding are taken as given, without ever questioning whether sharing and cooperation might not represent ethical validity.

Similar observations can be made on secularism, corporatisation, party politics, central banking systems, capital interest, violence... the list goes on, and we can surely not exclude the media and its enormous power and how it undermines genuine (equally) free speech in all societies. Yet, none are subject to question: most have become so accepted as to be almost invisible in their universality. And those which remain visible are guided by, and answer to, rules and bodies far beyond state jurisdiction: rules like GATS (General Agreement on Tariffs and Services) and TRIPS (Trade Related Intellectual Property rightS) and bodies like the WTO, G8, EU, NAFTA, UN, IMF and the World Bank.

Indeed, given that in most states operating this system, the populace is offered two, perhaps three electable alternatives, all bound and hence supportive of the above rules and bodies, in reality, when considering long-term, ultimate self-interest, we the people, democracy in general, has been sidelined. Our hearts and minds are no longer required.

Proximate Self-Interest

So let us return to self-interest and consider beyond the universal and ultimate (family and Truth) appealing to heart and mind and recognise the more immediate and personal aspects of proximate self-interest.

There has been a marked shift, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century, in how political parties appeal to their potential markets. Most specifically this relates to Freud and his observations on human motivation and behaviour and how rationality takes a back seat where emotions are involved. In fact, as Freud and numerous psychologists and psychoanalysts observe, in an excitable, unstable state, as a general rule, rationality goes out the window.

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1754) *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*

“Clearer than truth” in the words of Harry Truman, propaganda, or public relations (PR) as it is called domestically, has been used for centuries. However, under the stewardship of Edward Bernays, founder of modern PR industry and nephew of Sigmund Freud, understanding the science of the mind, has enabled governments and corporations to probe beyond our hearts and minds and connect with more primordial, instinctual motivation.

Such has been a boon for corporate expansion around the globe: tying emotions to products; creating identification through insecurity, markets through fear and hunger. It is beyond the scope of this paper, but one should note in passing, genuine influence, albeit fractional, is done with the wallet, or more likely credit card, and electing to purchase, or not to purchase, particular commodities. Where we, as individuals, elect to legitimate sweatshop trainers, tortured distorted animals, vegetables flown across the globe... and, most likely, fetched and carried by the power of hydro-carbon.

Indeed, it is as consumer, governments and would-be governments as well as corporations most likely picture their electorate. The electorate is seen as consumers firstly in terms of driving the economy and resource depletion, but also as consumers of messages and ideas, of hungers and fears. As such we find manipulated and meaningless words, shaped by psychologists and PR experts, often referred to as 'spin doctors', designed to direct and channel the electorate in particular directions. Words which mean nothing without qualification: peace, freedom, choice, justice, security, terrorist, extremist, fundamentalist... and of course democracy. Words designed to stir emotions, inflame passions, kindle fear, reinforce identification (in a climate of anxiety and uncertainty), yet without ever requiring scrutiny.

Who does not want peace, freedom, justice, security? Who would label themselves terrorist? Yet, beyond a warm fluffy feeling, how does one define Peace? In the international arena without terms and conditions and qualification, the term is completely useless. Adolf Hitler wanted peace, all one had to do was submit to his conditions. In reality, Peace, meaning absence of conflict, can be found only in oneself, and therefore a primordial quest for all: but, an impossibility to have another's imposed! Freedom, another primordial quest, encounters equally taxing problems: freedom from what, to do what, and where does freedom stop and indulgence begin? Once, long in our distant past, freedom meant having no master, to be unchained. Yet, even 250 years ago Rousseau recognised, “man is born free and everywhere he is in chains”: those chains are surely now stronger and more insidious than throughout history. In effect, Freedom has become freedom to spend and

freedom to consume.

Conclusion

The notion of freedom and how it is used as a tool brings us nicely towards our conclusion. For, while once politicians at least argued they sought approval and consensus from hearts and minds, through the science of the mind, they have gained access to our primordial, proximate self-interest, seated far deeper than heart and mind. There is no longer the need for future vision and high ideals: universal, ultimate self interest finds Truth further removed than ever from the general electorate.

Proximate self-interest can be shaped and driven with “Tax-cuts!” and “Terrorists!”, for such we need neither heart nor mind, nor spinal cord. Hunger and fear, our primordial drivers, demand only an instinctual, gut reaction.