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CST: An Orientation to a Life in Common

by Thomas W. Smith

Catholic social thought (hereafter CST) is not a political and economic program but an orientation towards our common life. This orientation is offered as a gift, for it claims to be a way through contemporary impasses. These impasses consist in the fact that our political culture makes it hard to navigate the problems *that culture itself has generated*. I will articulate two of these. This will give us a better sense of why something like CST is helpful in working through our current political situation.

The modern democratic state's legitimacy rests on two claims: that it makes its citizens safe; and that it makes them free. That is, legitimacy flows on the one hand, from national security, and on the other from the protection of individual rights and freedoms. To keep its citizens safe, the state arms itself to the teeth and does the sundry things we associate with national security policy. To make its citizens free, the democratic nation state holds that it must be neutral among competing notions of the good life. It develops a particular conception of freedom to justify its claim to neutrality. Proceeding from its rejection of the religious discord of early modern Europe, it denies that its task is to create a moral community bound together by a thick conception of the human good. Rather, the freedom it facilitates must have no prior moral content; freedom must be identified with the

proliferation of unencumbered choice to remain neutral. The most intuitive model for this conception of freedom is the economic choices available to consumers. According to this notion, the more choices I have, the freer I am.

A democratic state legitimates itself by shouldering these imperatives, but in doing so it buys into a set of practices that may undermine its legitimacy. First, it is arguable that we have made ourselves more *insecure* by pursuing security so relentlessly. To take one obvious example, terrorists know that one way to undermine a state that rests its legitimacy on security, is to make its citizens feel systematically unsafe. From this perspective, terrorism is a terrible, terribly clever political response to our claims about legitimacy. To take another obvious example, the nation state is powerful militarily so that it can guarantee its citizens' security. However, rogue states like North Korea know that the only way to guarantee that they won't be overrun by the superior conventional forces of western democracies is to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Our security imperative may lead to terrorism and nuclear proliferation. If the pursuit of a central legitimating principle starts to undermine the state's legitimacy, it has a problem that its conventional wisdom cannot resolve. Thus we are at an impasse.

The second impasse I will discuss has to do with freedom. To generate the income required to finance its defense capabilities, and to foster the choices that its citizens desire, the state embraces globalizing capitalism, with its attendant notions of efficiency, competition, unlimited economic growth, and free trade. However, we know that global capitalism in particular and the acids of progress in general eat away at traditional forms of life, producing an inevitable backlash. The defiance of modernization associated with both the resurgence of fundamentalism and cultural imperatives of various kinds may mean that we are facing a future full of hyper-capitalism on the one hand and tribalism on the other, neither of which are congenial to our usual notions of freedom.¹ In addition, free trade is supposed to make us wealthier and so enhance our choices, but

¹ Benjamin Barber, *Jihad versus McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World* (NY: Ballantine Books, 1996).

international free trade agreements also degrade the capacity of populations to direct the affairs within their own borders, thus undermining a deeply intuitive notion of a citizen's basic freedom. In addition, economic growth is supposed to enhance our power of choice, but the effects of this growth on the earth restrict them as well.

In a different vein, the democratic state fosters technological and scientific power to make us free; to liberate us from the vicissitudes of our mortal condition. Yet this raises the possibility that we are headed towards a "post-human future."² When we reflect moral choices raised by issues like cloning, stem cell research, organ harvesting, eugenics, or various forms of genetic therapy, we start to wonder whether the drive to liberate us from the human condition will dehumanize us.³

The emerging paradigms of both the state and of democratic citizenship make it very hard to solve the political problems face. We are increasingly tempted to think about politics on the market model wherein the government is a service provider responding to the demands of its citizens, carefully tracked in polls and focus groups.⁴ It is clear that we cannot walk out of the corners we've painted ourselves into (environmental corners, budgetary and fiscal corners, security corners) without some long-term reflection, planning, and sacrifice. However, political freedom understood on the model of consumer choice is inimical to these. Indeed, if the government is seen as a service

² Francis Fukuyama, *Our Post-Human Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (NY: Picador, 2003).

³ This is the theme of Leon Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics* (NY: Encounter Books, 2004).

⁴ Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles* (NY: Knopf, 2003) explores this phenomenon. For Bobbitt, the nation state's inability to meet the expectations we now bring has led to a shift to the market state, in which the government's job is to clear a space for individuals or groups to do their own negotiating. This model involves massive deregulation, and the withdrawal of the state from many of those areas where it used to bring moral pressure to bear. It means that government is free to encourage enterprise but not to protect against risk. It tries to increase the social and economic choices of its citizens, but not to assume anything much in the way of agreement about common goals or social goods.

provider for service-conscious consumer-citizens, then Tocqueville was right about the general outlines of democracy in the future. The state will adopt libertarian economic and social policies to maximize individual choice, even as it tends to a "benevolent" paternalism so as to meet its citizens' demands for security. The conclusion I am drawn to is that the conception of freedom shared by right and left alike in the U.S., and the implicit notions of state and citizenship that it presupposes, are precisely the obstacles to our freedom. Here again, if the pursuit of a central legitimating principle of the democratic state starts to undermine its legitimacy, it has a problem that its conventional wisdom cannot resolve. We are at an impasse again.

As Aristotle says, if water chokes, what does one wash it down with? If our conventional assumptions about the meaning and purpose of our common life are at the root of our impasses, these realities simply need to be rethought on the most fundamental levels. In short, we need an *orientation* towards social life that *reorients* us *away from* our conventional views, and *towards* a richer understanding of our social life. This is what CST tries to accomplish.

Therefore CST should be understood first and foremost as an attempt to engage in a critical dialogue with contemporary culture. It poses a set of natural human questions that we need to be asking ourselves anyway, and employs the resource of the Gospel and the Catholic tradition in order to help us think through these questions rigorously and critically: What is the way to peace? What is justice? What are rights? What is democracy? What are its limits? What is human labor and how can it be safeguarded from the contempt of the wealthy? The point is that CST seeks to articulate the questions that *already* underlie our various political and economic impasses and to answer them in a way that our own conventional wisdom cannot.

In addition, it proposes a set of principles that ought to guide both the dialogue it seeks to cultivate and our reflections on our practical tasks at hand:

- God has conferred on each of us an inviolable dignity that requires absolute

respect for persons when deciding on political, social, or economic policy.

- All culture is an expression of the ultimate longings of the human heart. We are called to fulfillment in part through the common work of building a culture of life.
- Persons are made for mutual loyalty and assistance. Since we are social beings, we have obligations to promote the unity of society and to act in a way which insures this unity. A flourishing society has principles that go beyond narrow self-interest.
- The state has a duty to the common good, not merely to the interests of the powerful and wealthy.
- The economy is for people; not people for the economy. Economic competition has its place, but a decent society will not treat dependence and vulnerability as failures.
- States are to exercise a preferential option for the poor when they determine social and economic policy.
- Human work and workers are dignified. The worker is more important than what he or she makes. Work is a way of making a living, but it is also has a personal, subjective dimension that is part of our way to flourishing. Our policies regarding work need to respect these realities.
- Current levels of spending on armaments are immoral both in themselves and insofar as they divert resources away from the poor.
- Consumerism is wrong. We must prioritize being over having; how we use our possessions to build up our common life, over how many possessions we have.

This is a thumbnail sketch and leaves much out. But the main points are there.

Three things need to be said in conclusion. First, I think that CST's orientation asks us to think about issues like security and freedom in a radically different way than the one we are used to. Yet second, it is at least arguable that CST's orientation towards these issues moves us through the impasses I have identified in a way that our own conventional wisdom does not. Specifically, CST does not legitimate state authority on the bases of security and consumer choice, but rather on respect for the

common good of all, and particular concern for the weak and disadvantaged. Third, all this clearly needs much more specification, and so CST asks us to develop a practical wisdom that brings these general principles to bear on our specific economic and political problems in all their complexity.

In all this, CST offers a way to work through our impasses with an intelligent realism leavened with hope.

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Abandoning the Long-Term Unemployed

people.⁵ Moreover, individuals out of work for at least six months -- so-called long-term unemployed -- comprise 23% of total unemployment, the largest share since July 1983. And although the overall amount of goods and services produced has been growing, job growth and the unemployment rate have not responded anywhere near proportionately or in line with historical experience. The unemployment rate is at the same level that it was over two years ago at the beginning of the current economic expansion (November 2001), and is still well above the 3.9% low point hit in October 2000.⁶ Indeed, the abnormally weak labor market for this stage of the business cycle has raised eyebrows in many quarters, including those of policy makers at the Federal Reserve.