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The Origins of America's Unique and Spectacular Cruelty

What Happens When Societies Don't Invest in Civilizing Themselves?



A friend, recently, told me a very interesting and telling story. She'd recently been in the States, where she was taking the subway to work, and she fell down, injuring her wrist. Not a single person helped her up—they all stared at her angrily as if to say: “you are going to make us late for work!!”. (Ironically, the train was full of doctors, nurses, and health-care workers).

She contrasted that with London—where, the last year, when she'd broken a limb, and had a cast on, people would regularly, and very courteously, give up their seats on the tube.

It's a tiny example. And perhaps you will say it's just a meaningless anecdote. But by now, American cruelty is both legendary—and one of the world's great unsolved mysteries. Just why would people in a rich country leave their neighbours to die for a lack of basic medicine, their young without good jobs or retirements, make their elderly work until their dying day, cripple students with lifelong debt, charge new mothers half of average income just to have a baby—not to mention shrug when their kids begin massacring each other at school? What motivates the kind of spectacular, unique, unimaginable, and gruesome cruelty that we see in America, which exists nowhere else in the world?

See that pic above? It's kids huddling under bulletproof blankets, doing “active shooter drills”. That's what I mean by “unique and spectacular cruelty”. No kid should—ever—have to be traumatized and victimized like that, and indeed, even kids in Pakistan and Iran aren't.

(And no, I don't mean “all Americans”. I just mean something like “more” or maybe “enough”, if you want to think statistically, that the distribution of cruelty has fatter tails and a higher peak.)

My answer goes something like this. Americans, you must remember, grew up in the shadow of endless war. With two “sides” who championed atomic individualism, lionized competition and brutality, and despised weakness and fragility. And thus, America forgot—or maybe never evolved—the notion of a public interest. Each man for himself, everyone against everyone himself. So all there is left in America is extreme capitalism now. Few championed a more balanced, saner, healthier way of life, about a common good, about virtue, about a higher purpose. And in that way, America has become something like, ironically enough, a mirror image of its great enemy, the Soviet Union. It is a totalist society, run by and for one end—only a slightly different one: money.

That created a society in which there is no real opportunity to cultivate, nurture, or develop kindness or gentleness, which as we will see, are qualities, that a society needs to invest in, too. The American economy is extreme capitalism, through and through. For example, in other rich countries, at least half the economy is not for profit, sometimes more. But in America, it's just a few percent. So American life is made mostly

only of the values of predatory capitalism now—bruising competition, domination, greed, punishment, discipline, cunning, ruthlessness, egotism. We might call them malignantly narcissistic values. But when the sole end of all thought, action, and effort is making money, even at the detriment of others, what else can exist?

Hence, today, there is almost no sphere or arena of American life in which the values of predatory capitalism don't predominate or monopolize. Because society is made up more or less only of predatory capitalism, only those values can ever be expressed. Not even in, say, media, not healthcare, not education—which, in other rich countries, because they are not run for profit, are arenas in which softer and gentler qualities can be expressed, like decency, reason, dignity, purpose, meaning, belonging, truth, care, mercy.

But because most of America is now managed by and predatory capital—even its healthcare, media, and education—there is little room, space, opportunity, chance to discuss and suggest and educate people about higher ideals, values, and purposes. For example, on the BBC, I can watch endless documentaries by academics on everything from Renaissance art to French literature—but in America, I'm stuck with Ancient Aliens, poverty porn, police-state reality shows. What is that going to teach me, show me, induce in me—except ignorance, paranoia, resentment, and spite?

The result is a kind of impoverishment we don't often discuss. A lack, or deficit, of civilizing mechanisms. You see, in other countries, things like media, healthcare, and education, do more than just “provide a service”. Because they're public goods, are also things that bind people together, connect them with history, bring out their better selves—not just their inner predator. Through them, by treating each other with care and respect as we share them, we learn what it is to be gentle, civilized. They educate us, in that way, about what is to be kind.

Remember my Tube story? Americans don't often know this unwritten code of conduct—give your seat up to an elderly or injured person. But the Brits pride themselves on it. Now, such codes evolve best and most where there are public goods—because people need to develop ways to share them fairly. So on the Tube, we give up our seats, to make it work for everyone, because it belongs to everyone. We learn, and enact, a kind of tiny but mighty moral lesson in this way. It's a little but beautiful thing, that almost invisible civilizing mechanism.

Now imagine that everything in a society is run by and for the rules of predatory capitalism. Everything. What reason is there to treat anyone with decency, respect, fairness, dignity? You don't give up your first-class airline seat to an old woman if you're an aspiring hedge fund asshole, do you? Why would you? So there's little need for such norms and codes of gentleness and kindness to develop, evolve, and grow unless a society has public goods. In econ-parlance, we'd say that an "positive externality" of public goods is that they are civilizing mechanisms, which produce norms and codes of gentleness and kindness and respect and dignity.

But the reverse is also true: a purely capitalist society will never really learn how to be civilized. It's institutions will all be "profit centers"—but none will evolve to be civilizing mechanisms, which teach people how to cooperate, respect one another, treat one another with dignity.

So if most everything is purely capitalist, a society cannot really invest in gentleness and kindness. The only lesson that people will really learn is that their neighbours and peers, young and old, are commodities. Things. Objects. Means. To be used, abused, and discarded, the moment that they are no longer profitable. But no one will give up their seat when anyone else falls down—because that requires a higher set of values: empathy, courage, imagination, grace, mercy, humility.

Those things, those great virtues, do not really exist in America anymore, except maybe in church sermons, which is to say, not in the real world. So when we speak of American cruelty, we are really speaking about a lack of civilizing mechanisms, which encode, normalize, sustain, and nurture higher values, or enduringly good human qualities, however you want to put it. These things which define the best in us. Nobility, truth, beauty, justice, service, if you would like me to add to the list above.

Americans seem to have forgotten that these things, these life-giving and life-changing virtues, exist at all—and that they must be, like anything else in society, nurtured and invested in, if we wish them to exist. And the strange thing is that no one appears able to teach them, certainly not me: they don't have to live like that.

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