

Tuesday, August 5, 2008

The Long Tail of Entitlement Trumps Self-Reliance and Intelligence

I have long had in my mind's eye a kind of chart with a bell curve in it that intuitively explained to me why, over time in a democracy, the lowest common denominator of cultural and political discourse will sink, which will have a negative feedback effect on the overall robustness of society. Today I got an email from my longtime internet penpal Larry Wallman, quoting Ron Paul, that finally motivated me enough to whip up excel and try to plot it:

What Larry Wallman sent via email was his famed "Sunday Comments", which, since I no longer daytrade at all, is actually the only reason I subscribe to his stock market newsletter...

[quote]

Last week, Ron Paul of Texas, said something so profound that it needs to be said here, please read this carefully:

"But the people who are screaming for the housing bailout are the people who got their houses for free. You know, they didn't have to put any money down. The house went up in value. They even borrowed more money. Then they spent it. Now they want you and I to bail them out so that they can keep their homes" - Congressman Ron Paul

You cannot explain what's going on with the latest "bail out" any better than Mr. Paul just did. People got into homes with no money, borrowed against the home because supposedly the value was increasing and then when they found they really couldn't make the payments when the rates reset, they whined to Uncle Sam and now YOU and I are going to have to pay to bail them out. Will I get their home in return for bailing them out? Will I get a percent of the profits if they sell? No. Will I get a lousy Christmas card? No. I get absolutely nothing. You get absolutely nothing. The only people that get something are the politicians who will get votes. Lets face it, if I was a deadbeat, living in a house I had no right to even consider, let alone buy, I'd vote for the idiot that is going to allow me to live there too.

And so it goes, the death spiral of the US economy.[/quote]

Let me explain why my chart may explain why these economic death spirals are inevitable as the tides...

First, we have the "intelligence bell curve", which most would agree looks pretty standard. We have the meaty part in the middle containing average people of average intelligence, but we live on Planet Wobegon and we all consider ourselves to be of above average intelligence. Be that as it may, on either end of the meaty part, to the right we have a small number of intellectually superior people who are the most intelligent among us, and to the left, we have a long, long, LONG tail of couch potatoes who are stupider than monkeys every single one us believes is the exclusive domain of other people.

What makes the phenomenon pernicious is the "common denominator" line. If we bisect our bell curve down the middle, everyone to the right would be considered "above average" intelligence. The problem with these people, is that they tend to think. The further to the right we go up the more intelligent side of the curve, the less effect mindless slogans have in galvanizing this group into a herdlike response to some external stimulus as dictated by a third party (a.k.a. the government).

To make matters worse, the higher intelligence of the people on this side of the curve begets more lateral, non-linear, non-impulsive thought processes, which means that given a problem, the people on this side of the curve will probably come up with a multitude of answers. There is less likely to be a consensus here and if there's one thing a politician MUST HAVE, especially one facing re-election, or election is as many people as possible thinking the same thing.

If we turn our attention to the left side of the curve, we find the duller knives in the drawer. Those more easily bamboozled because of their economic, cultural, and political illiteracy can be herded, grouped, massed and convinced of the same thing much more easily. "They hate us because of our freedoms", "Happiness is just around the corner" and "The economy is fundamentally sound" are what these people almost want to hear, and have no disbelief to suspend. The left side of the intelligence bell curve we find a much more pliable mass of people who can be more easily grouped into easy-to-explain beliefs which can result in them voting more or less in unison.

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Thus, to the politician, the low hanging fruit is always the less intelligent side of the intelligence bell curve, and each iteration of the political process will cause them to target that half of the curve with platforms and policies that "make sense" to stupid people. This either results in a society where the political policies are dictated by the dumbest people, or one where politicians must LIE in order to get elected.

This is why people like Ron Paul will never, ever be the Republican nominee, even though he is pretty well the only textbook definition of a Republican in the entire party.

Posted by Mark Jeftovic in Personal Liberty at 11:51

Wednesday, December 5, 2007

He says that like it's a bad thing...

I don't know who Jesse Lerner is, I don't own a gun, and I may be the only card carrying libertarian in the world who has never read an Ayn Rand book. But I felt I had to put down my thoughts in response to his "Sinister Folly of Ayn Rand" rant on the Huffington Post. Specifically this comment:

In her insistence that she owed nothing to the state, nothing to any human being other than herself, Rand epitomized the kind of childishness shown by libertarians who insist that they have every legal and moral right to own as many guns as they please, pay no taxes, educate their children at home, and live free of any law except those governing, in the most direct manner, their own security and that of their neighbors. A watered-down form of this nonsense today exists in the platform of presidential candidate Ron Paul...

which of course is where the title of today's post comes from. As I said, I've never read an Ayn Rand book and I don't own a gun but I uphold the libertarian ideals that we are all self-sovereign individuals. Perhaps we could voluntarily sublimate ourselves to a state or to a government that earned our fealty through adherence to underlying mechanisms of their power (like holding true to the US Constitution or the Canadian Charter of Rights), but show me a government that actually does that. Especially these days.

I think what people like Lerner don't get about Libertarianism isn't that we claim to put our interests above all else, that we're looking out for number one. Yes, we do that, but with that comes personal responsibility for our own lives. So not only do we claim unbridled freedom for our own persons, we accept the absolute responsibility that comes with it.

Many people don't like that, they can't handle it. Everything meaningful in their life has to be attributed to external factors: "I didn't get a raise because I'm black", "I didn't get hired because I'm white", "I don't have any money because you're rich", "The state owes me healthcare (because I'd rather spend my money on cigarettes, twinkies and soft drinks)". The list goes on and on. Give me a break.

Libertarians claim sole responsibility over their own lot in life and with that comes the freedom to do whatever they want. Are there any limits to this unbridled self-actualization? Can we be a society of hedonists, living full-on balls to the wall and to hell with everybody else? Well, that isn't what it's about. Conspicuously absent from Lerner's rant is the Non-Aggression Principle, nothing short of the cornerstone of most Libertarian ideology.

The NAP basically says we can all do what we want provided we don't impede on the rights of others to do as they want. So, as I've always said: If you want to be a left-leaning, collectivist pinko, go for it. Don't expect, or try to force me, to come along.

Lerner seems to go on to say that Capitalism is some evil death cult inflicted on the world by Ayn Rand:

Rand herself said that capitalism is the only economic system that is fully compatible with man's nature--but on the basis of what evidence? Did anyone ever challenge her on how she came to that conclusion, beyond her own personal conviction that it was so? What, after all, did she know of "man's nature"?

Again, he talks about capitalism and free markets like they're bad things. This is a tough one to tackle and one I've been grappling with awhile. The left, the Adbusters crew, and most activists decry capitalism as the root of all Evil.

This is a problem because in this day and age what passes for "capitalism" simply isn't, and yes, it causes havoc and misery throughout the world. The economic abuses being perpetrated by central bankers, oligarchs and governments are nothing short of crimes against humanity. The playing fields are deliberately kept uneven, laws are rewritten to exempt a few at the expense of future generations. It remains to be seen whether the damage done by Federal Reserve and the corruption of a sound monetary system will ever be undone.

The process has accelerated under the last few years of Neo-CON rule in North America and it has handed plenty ammunition to the left and to those who uphold the tyranny of the mob: Our "powers-that-be" have played dirty pool for generations. It has gotten much much worse since 9/11. After this "Project for a New American Century" runs its course (if any of us are still left) the word "capitalism" will be tarnished beyond usability. The most disastrous political regime in history will swing us inexorably to the hard left for generations to come: in the future it will be illegal to be talented,

wealthy, fortunate or to enjoy an advantage of any kind.

It is very difficult to explain to anti-capitalists why the things they hate about what they think is capitalism isn't actually capitalism and that real capitalists don't like it either. I always suggest the obscure but IMHO required reading of Vincent LoCascio's *The Monetary Elite vs. Gold's Honest Discipline* with a side order of Ferdinand Lips' *Gold Wars: The Battle Against Sound Money As Seen from a Swiss Perspective*.

Perhaps Lerner's biggest misconception about Libertarianism seems to be his belief that we're all antisocial beserkers that deny the existence of society because he finds it necessary to plead the case for playing nice with one another

We are creatures with a long evolutionary history of social structure and social co-operation. This makes sense; we are predators without effective claws or teeth, and we can't run very fast. How did our ancient ancestors catch large elephant and buffalo? By working as a group, by co-operating and communicating. Social organization is our special adaptation, our evolutionary niche; indeed, it is now standard evolutionary theory that there are dynamic relationships between the development of intelligence, language and social organization - with the adaptive payoff being better social organization, the thing vital to survival. In fact there is nothing else that can satisfactorily explain such a stunning evolutionary adaptation as language; an adaptation that loses all meaning, by the way, if you deny that society exists.

Uh, ok. Libertarians hold themselves as self-sovereign. That doesn't mean they can't function in groups and it certainly doesn't mean we should all invent our own languages and talk to ourselves alone and pretend that there's nobody else here on the planet.

What is important to Libertarians are that social interactions are free from coercion. As the concept of mutual agreement is paramount to Libertarians, they are no strangers to compromise and negotiation (if that's Lerner's worry, he should be looking at his own country's executive branch to find a frightening absence of those qualities).

The world could use a dose of the Non-Aggression Principal, especially here in the West where our governments spend a lot of time telling the rest of the world how they're supposed to live their lives and shitting all over other people's rights to self-determination; undertaking actions most of us disagree with and doing it in our names.

This is the reason Libertarians assert their own self-sovereignty, in word to say "My government's actions do not speak for me, I speak for me."

This is the reason why Ron Paul is getting so much grassroots support: He isn't a Republican as much as he's trying to bring a lost Republic back onto the rails it's Constitution describes. He says things that need to be said and cuts to the true underlying causes of our age's malaise, but as usual, nobody wants to hear it.

Posted by Mark Jeftovic in Personal Liberty at 11:59