

Nature abhors a vacuum: sex, emotion, loyalty and the rise of illiberal economics

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I was just as stunned, initially, as many of my fellow American by the results of the 2016 presidential election. I could see reasons why people might vote for “change” over more mainstream political leadership, especially given that both parties have been quite cozy with Wall Street and have failed to address the wage stagnation affecting the bulk of the population. But I thought that any reasonable person would be revolted by the narcissistic, juvenile, bullying, lying behavior of the Republican candidate, and realize that he was clearly unfit for office. As an economist, I was taken aback by the variously kleptocratic and fantastical aspects of Trump’s intended economic directions. As a feminist and ecological economist, I was especially appalled by Trump’s braggadocious pussy-grabbing and climate-change-denying. While, according to the popular vote, a majority of voters saw Trump this way, my assumptions clearly did not apply to a substantial and vocal minority.

On further reading, conversing, and reflection, however, I’ve come to think that the causes of this disastrous event are not unrelated to something that I’ve been writing about for a long time: the inadequacies of the mainstream neoclassical economics orthodoxy. Mainstream economics and liberal political philosophy have in common a particular story about human beings and how we relate to each other in society. Both have emphasized individuality, reason, freedom, and a marketplace or public sphere in which agent-citizens interact, at somewhat of a distance, as peers and equals.¹ Both have, correspondingly, neglected much about what makes us human, and about how we evolved as social beings. My serious mistake was in thinking that we, as a discipline and a society, might be able to move past this one-sided view in a positive direction.

So this essay will be largely a personal reflection, drawing on my own past work. I will highlight the vacant spaces and weak spots in mainstream economic and political analysis that Trump and his handlers were able to so thoroughly exploit. And, I hope, I will give some small gleam of hope about how we might prevent a new Dark Age.

¹ See (Meagher and Nelson, 2004). An assumption of at least relative equality is implicit in the model of optimizing agents and unfettered competitive markets that lies at the core of mainstream economics. The idea that market activities lead to welfare-maximizing outcomes is only even mildly plausible if one also assumes that everyone has an endowment of resources sufficient to make life – and choice-making – possible.

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The void in neoclassical orthodoxy

Since the 1990s, I and some other feminist economists have been pointing out that the mainstream discipline of economics has a profoundly masculinist bias. That is, aspects of human nature, experience, and behavior that fit a culturally “macho” mold have been emphasized and elevated, while those that are culturally associated with a lesser-valued femininity have been ignored.

The neoclassical orthodoxy focuses on markets and perhaps the public sphere, but categorizes families and unpaid work as “non-economic”. The discipline adheres to exaggerated notions of (strictly logical) reason, while neglecting emotion and embodiment. It sees the economy in terms of autonomous agents, while glossing over all connection, dependency, and interdependency. It elevates self-interest, considering an interest in the well-being of others to be an anomalous and largely unnecessary trait. It defines objective “rigor” in terms of detachment and abstraction, treating normative or moral concerns as overly subjective, and assuming they can be safely denied or excluded. It elevates mathematical proof and fine-tuned econometric methods while downplaying detailed, concrete observation and good, verbal narratives.

These are all legacies of particular, and peculiar, Enlightenment notions of human nature and of science. Susan Bordo wrote,

“The Cartesian ‘masculinization of thought’, is one intellectual ‘moment’ of an acute historical flight from the feminine, from the memory of union with the maternal world, and a rejection of all values associated with it” (Bordo, 1987, p. 9).

James Hillman has written,

“The specific consciousness we call scientific, Western and modern is the long sharpened tool of the masculine mind that has discarded parts of its own substance, calling it ‘Eve,’ ‘female’ and ‘inferior’” (quoted in Bordo, 1986, p. 441).

The counterpoint to “rational man”, Elizabeth Fee has pointed out, is

“woman [who] provides his connection with nature; she is the mediating force between man and nature, a reminder of his childhood, a reminder of the body, and a reminder of sexuality, passion, and human connectedness” (Fee, 1983, p. 12).

While other schools of economics that share the pluralist umbrella have pointed out the limitations of various orthodox assumptions, I believe that feminist economics has made a unique contribution in pointing out the systematic – and unremittingly gender-biased – nature of the assumptions and exclusions made by the orthodoxy.

Of course, recognition of the gender biases in the profession is only a first step. Some would try to reassert that “masculine is good”. Others, doing what I call “feminine” economics, try to simply turn the tables: disavowing competition and self-interest, for example, they call for a discipline – and society – founded exclusively on cooperation and altruism. To me, that is still

playing with half a deck. The variant of *feminist* economics that I have propounded seeks to go further. I have wanted to think past the dualism, to think about characteristics we all – men and women both – share, and to explore how one-sided views of any kind tend to create traps.

Recognizing connection and emotion

Take, for example, the notions of autonomy and dependence. In classical liberal political thought as in economics, the citizen-agent is self-determining, self-sufficient, and ready for active participation in the polity or the market. If you asked where women were in this model, up until perhaps the 1960s, you would be told that women were “dependents” of their husbands or fathers. As it was once stated in British common law, in marriage “the two become one, and the one is the husband”. Yet no one – child or adult, man or woman – is ever really self-sufficient. The attainments of “self-made men” are always dependent on the invisible services of mothers, wives, and others. We have called this the myth of the “separative self”. The idea that women magically dissolve into subservient roles we labeled the myth of the “soluble self”.² Getting beyond these myths, we can recognize that we are all, always, both individuated – distinguishable from those around us – and thoroughly connected, though our social and material constitution.

I proposed a “gender-value compass”, shown in Figure 1 to illustrate this point. The top two cells show a positive complementarity: The recognition that we are all individuals-in-relation. The M+ to F– diagonal shows our usual, dualistic way of looking at things, e.g., superior masculine individuality versus the invisibility of women. Yet the M– cell shows what actually happens if we emphasize “masculinity” alone, as the F– cell likewise demonstrates for “femininity” alone.

Figure 1 The gender/value compass for individuality and relation

M+	F+
individual	related
M–	F–
separative	soluble

Going one step further in this analysis – before we turn back to looking at Trumponomics – one can use this diagram to think about a variety of possible human relations.³

Three fatally partial – if not outright negative – images are based on the bottom half of the compass:

- *Separative-separative (arm’s length)*: When separative selves interact with other separative selves, such interactions must be purely external. This is the fundamental

² This analysis was introduced to feminist economics by Paula England (1993, 2003) and myself (1992), both of us drawing in turn on the work of theologian Catherine Keller (1986).

³ I introduced this typology in Nelson (2006). However, I elaborate more here about their emotional and political dimensions.

story about the nature and interactions of “citizens” in liberal politics and “agents” in neoclassical models of markets. This image appeals (only) to desires for self-preservation, self-sufficiency, and individual autonomy. Society, in this view, is only an agglomeration of individuals, perhaps bound by a freely entered “social contract” modeled on idealized market contracts.

- *Soluble-soluble (merger)*: When soluble selves interact with other soluble selves, the image is of complete merger. Less noticed, this is the implicit assumption about the interior of an entity, when talking about “nations”, “firms” or “households” as if they were, themselves, individual agents. At a political and emotional level, being “part of a movement” gives one a sense of identity with something larger than oneself, appealing to the human need to belong. Solubility has other attractive features as well: it absolves one of some of the burdens of individual moral responsibility, and allows one to feel virtuous about one’s altruism and self-sacrifice.
- *Separative-soluble (domination)*: When a separative self interacts with one or more soluble selves, the result is a strict hierarchy. The soluble selves take orders from and support (albeit invisibly) the separative self, who is perceived as autonomous, active, and in control. The separative side offers those who take on its role feelings of great power, while people who put a high value on loyalty, obedience, and sacrifice may find some sense of meaning in life through the self-abnegating service and hero-worship involved in the corresponding role of solubility.

But the top half of the diagram reminds us that more authentic, fuller, individuals-in-relation ways of being, are also possible:

- *Mutuality*: When individuals-in-relation treat each other with respect and consideration, so that the relation is supportive of the positive formative process of each. This has two important sub-types:
 - *Symmetric mutuality*: mutuality between similarly-situated persons. Relations among equals do not need to be purely external and arms-length. A richer notion of liberal society imagines that justice, cooperation, vision and community spirit inform and motivate “equal” adults.
 - *Asymmetric mutuality*: mutuality in relations characterized by unequal power, status, ability or resources. In the real world there are adults and children, people with greater abilities and people with lesser, and people with more economic and political resources and people with less. Yet these do not have to be relations of domination. Imagining a “good society” in the face of asymmetry requires valuing good leadership and authentic care, perhaps calling on the metaphor of a nurturing family.

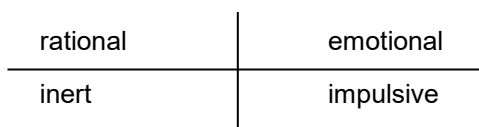
My hope had been that by expanding our liberal economic and political philosophies beyond their hyper-fixation on the individual, we might be able to recognize and analyze the wider variety of more complex relationships that, in fact, play large roles in structuring our society, economy, and civic life. By recognizing the diversity of ways in which we imagine our relationships, I hoped we could become both more knowledgeable and more wise. In particular, I hoped we could become more cognizant of unhealthy relations of domination, and try to replace them with healthy relations of mutuality.

Liberal thinkers may find it relatively easy to imagine respectful, supportive, and warm relations occurring among peers (symmetric mutuality), since this image preserves a basic

sense of equality. But relations of care and of responsible leadership (asymmetric mutuality) are equally important – even if they may initially seem to belong to the realms of nature, and of monarchy modeled on a paternalistic family, that Enlightenment thinkers tried to leave behind. I have even suggested, as a counterpoint to a tendency to associate relationships of care exclusively with women, that we revitalize the old notion of “good husbandry” (coming from images of careful tending of crops and animals) to inspire more care on the part of men, and more care within culturally masculine-associated realms including finance and commerce (Nelson, 2016).

I have also argued that, along with freedom and reason, economic analysis and policy needed to take into account the very real human desire for affiliation and capacity for emotion (Nelson, 2004). This is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 The “gender/value compass” for reason and emotion



Feelings both inform us and motivate our actions. The word “emotion”, in fact, comes from Latin roots meaning “out-move”. Reason can help us determine what the right thing is to do, but reason alone gives us no impetus to actually do it (Damasio, 1994).

In *Ecological Economics* in 2013 (Nelson, 2013), I wrote that I hoped that we could move away from one-sided 17th- and 18th-century notions, which I called “Enlightenment Beta” to a full-fledged, more inclusive and useful “Enlightenment 2.0”. Enlightenment 2.0 would build narratives that appeal to profoundly human moral drivers including community, loyalty, and the sense of being part of something much larger than oneself, as well as respect for the individual. It would be geared towards action, not just analysis, and towards building resilience in worst and uncertain cases, not just efficiency in best cases and in a known, predictable world. I had hoped that we could, by developing a more adequate discipline of economics, contribute to a more just and sustainable society. Recently, I have argued that fear of fear – an emotion thought of as especially “unmanly” – is both biasing our empirical research (Nelson, 2014) and playing a role in our inability, as a society, to address climate change (Nelson, 2015).

We have been, by and large, repressing of all notions of connection and emotion with our Enlightenment Beta notions of economic and political life. I hoped that we could incorporate these in a good way and grow more wise, loving, and hopeful.

The rise of Trumpism

But we did not. This left a vacuum.

Various scholarly commentators have been pointed out this hole, and how Trump filled it. Linguist George Lakoff has for many years chastised Democrats for running campaigns that largely appeal only to voters’ reason, while neglecting to hit hard on values, emotions, and

powerful language and narrative (Lakoff, 2004, Lakoff, 2016). He explains the rise of Trump in terms of emotional appeals to a metaphorical understanding of the nation as a “strict father family”, to the idea of a well-ordered hierarchy, and to hero worship. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s extensive fieldwork among Tea Party supporters in environmentally poisoned areas of Louisiana revealed strong values related to loyalty, sacrifice, family, community, and church. Being a Trump supporter offered the opportunity of belonging to a movement, and a “giddy” sense of emotional release from the constraints of being “politically correct” (Hochschild, 2016, pp. 228, 234). The “deep story” by which people understood their lives pictured government – not in a classically liberal way as being the result of a social contract, or in a richer liberal way of embodying community – but (*a la* “free market economics”) as a domineering force stealing their money and their freedoms (Hochschild, 2016, p. Chap. 9). Psychologists Jonathan Haidt (Haidt, 2012) and Joshua Green (Greene, 2013) have likewise noted the diversity of deep human moral values, which include loyalty and sanctity, and the tendency of liberal rhetoric to appeal to only a narrow, individualist band.

Arguments based on reason and facts alone make little headway when confronted with powerful metaphors, deep stories, and moral intuitions, which in turn may be powerfully supported by habit, stories, and ritual. Taking a longer-term view, author of works on religion Karen Armstrong describes how an exclusive focus on *logos* to the exclusion of *mythos* has created a “void at the heart of modern culture” (Armstrong, 2000, p. 370). *Logos* is the factual, scientific understanding in which “[e]fficiency was the new watchword” (Armstrong, 2005, p. 121). *Mythos*, on the other hand, refers to the spiritual and intuitive ways in which we come to understand the meaning and value of our lives. She writes of how this vacuum has given rise to “numbing despair, a creeping mental paralysis, and a sense of impotence and rage”, “fearful and destructive unreason”, “destructive mythologies [that] have been narrowly racial, ethnic, denominational and egotistic, and attempt to exalt the self by demonizing the other” and one who “seeks not heroism, but only barren celebrity” (Armstrong, 2005, pp. 122, 129, 136, 143). While Trumpism was not what she was pointing to at the time, it certainly fits her description.

And the discipline which most epitomizes “[e]fficiency as the new watchword” is, of course, economics. While trying to model itself on an image of detached, fact-based *logos*, it in fact has become a powerful though ultimately harmful *mythos*. In the mainstream economic orthodox myth, only *separative-separative* human relationships matter and economic self-interest rules. Feminist economics had attempted to turn the field back towards a richer and more factual basis, by pointing out the importance of power, care, and narratives (Ferber and Nelson, 1993). We made little headway (Ferber and Nelson, 2003). What we have seen, instead, is this void being filled, at a large-scale social and political level, by emotions and connections of a destructive sort: hatred, anger, unreason, and xenophobia. The excesses of neoliberal doctrines have not been superseded by the sort of Enlightenment 2.0 I envisioned, but instead by a raging illiberalism.

Where do we go from here?

The world has, alas, seen the rise of this sort of unreason before. Reason will be one of the tools with which we can address it, but only a weak one unless we leave behind Enlightenment Beta strictures and learn to deal with broader and deeper dimensions of human experience.

The media bring me daily news of lies, hatred, and fear. As an economist, I still aspire to create knowledge about the economy – about how societies organize themselves to provide for the survival and flourishing of life, or fail to do so. As a feminist economist who has worked on issues of care, I still want to work on the side of love. As an ecological economist who has worked on issues of climate change I still want to work on the side of hope. As a teacher, I still value educating students minds and hearts. As citizens, of the United States or of the earth, we cannot give up.

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