

The Progressive Bias of Truth

By Roland F. Moy



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A life long singer, he continues a family tradition of quartet singing and has long been active with the local Arts Council, organizing musical shows to raise funds for music scholarships and producing fifteen annual summer community chorus events.

Since joining the Torch Club in Boone, NC in 2007, Moy has developed several papers which apply a core political science concern about abuse of power to the related field of economics, and which attempt to clarify political economy realities that are often clouded by political rhetoric.

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Conservative columnist George Will once observed, “Conservatism is true” (qtd. in Zakaria), explaining that intelligent conservatism was grounded in reality, as opposed to the party line Marxist in the old joke, who asked, “I know it works in practice, but does it work in theory?”

This perspective on contemporary

conservatism in the United States, together with the 2012 publication of Samuel Arbeson’s *The Half-Life of Facts: Why Everything We Know Has An Expiration Date*, prompts an inquiring mind to examine how deeply what we know of reality has influenced various strains of American thought and policy over the years. The following analysis will provide a brief historical overview of how changes in factual understanding of the world and the evolution of values have impacted governmental policy and practice.

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The Progress of Reality

In the 17th century, a variety of challenges to knowledge based upon tradition and faith gained momentum as knowledge based upon reason and newly acquired scientific evidence became more accessible and widespread. At the same time, the Protestant Reformation began a trend toward the organization of civic life from the perspective of the individual rather than viewing the common man

as the bottom of a hierarchical pyramid of authority. Both trends helped justify not only replacing state directed mercantilism with the ideals of the individualized market economy, but also replacing monarchy with governmental patterns based upon popular sovereignty and elections.

In Europe, upholders of faith and tradition reacted grudgingly to new evidence, but did eventually come to terms with it; the same was not always true in the United States.

The 17th century confrontation between the Roman Catholic Church and the heliocentric theory of Galileo led the church to accept it as a hypothesis to be explored, but to reject his insistence that its truth required a reinterpretation of scripture (“The Galileo Controversy”). The truth of his theory was not accepted until later technology verified parallax shifts in the position of the stars as the earth moved in its orbit around the sun, impelling the church to change its scriptural interpretation on this matter from a literalist to a metaphorical position.

In the 20th century, as evidence from several branches of scientific inquiry converged in support of evolutionary theory, the Roman Catholic Church came to accept that biological evolution over millions of years was compatible with Christian faith (Gonzalez). In contrast, significant portions of the American Protestant faith tradition offer a history of stubbornly literal interpretation of biblical texts going back as far as the Massachusetts witch trials of the 1600s. This tendency to apply traditional texts to political and social issues in a literal minded way devoid of context was carried on by those quoting scripture in support of

slavery and by those rejecting evolution, passing on a toxic heritage that has become one element of contemporary American conservative truth.

Respect for the reality of history and tradition, as noted above by Will, is another basis for American conservatism as a political philosophy and movement. A third is the use of deductive reasoning from abstract principles as reformulated in the *Mount Vernon Statement* of 2010, which reminds us that “the Founders created an enduring framework of limited government based on the rule of law” and that “the Declaration asserts self-evident truths based on the laws of nature and nature’s God” and furthermore “defends life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” The *Statement* goes on to note that Constitutional conservatism “reminds economic conservatives that morality is essential to limited government” and “encourages free enterprise, the individual entrepreneur, and economic reforms grounded in market solutions.” All of these assertions and principles can indeed provide guidance on policy—provided that they are grounded in historical and contemporary reality, which would require interpretation and judgment in addition to a balancing with other values.¹

The historical context in which the Founders developed their principles of individual liberty and limited government is examined in James Huston’s *Securing the Fruits of Labor: The American Concept of Wealth Distribution 1765-1900*. The Founders believed that previous attempts to establish republican government had failed primarily because of deep maldistribution of wealth. In the 1770s, when the non-plantation colonial majority lived on semi-subsistence family farms, grand fortunes rarely occurred, and the wealth gaps would stay limited so long as all those who labored had the liberty to enjoy the “fruits of their labor.” The Founders were also aware that European aristocrats

manipulated politics to gain economic advantage. Limited government, in this context, helped to sustain the liberty that promoted natural economic equality among small economic units and, therefore, the survival of republican government. The unfolding of American history since the Founders, however, presents a series of reality checks for evaluating the founding documents and the policy prescriptions that Constitutional conservatives believe they still entail.

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The Unfolding Reality

The Constitution provided that Congress establish post offices and post roads; the Post Office Act of 1792 unified the new nation and facilitated the collection of tariffs from distant towns. These tariffs, along with the establishment of a national bank, encouraged local development of the infant industries that grew throughout the

coming century. With the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, the national government required that one of every 36 plots of land be set aside for public education. Starting in 1817, funding was provided for the 363 mile Erie Canal from Albany on the Hudson River to Buffalo on Lake Erie, which encouraged settlement further west and made New York City the major United States port.

Throughout the 19th century, new inventions such as steam power, the cotton gin, and mechanical clothing manufacture expanded industrial and commercial opportunities, enabling greater wealth accumulation and economic differentiation. Railroad transportation accelerated the demise of self-sufficient farming as the produce sold and the items needed for living and production became firmly tied to national market pricing. The Pacific Railroad and Homestead Acts in 1863 pushed the national market coast to coast. Income for farm production began to lag (except in wartime) behind prices for commercial products, placing farmers in a position of necessity that made it difficult to resist discriminatory pricing by railroads.² The Interstate Commerce Commission, established in 1887, was supposed to regulate such behavior by railroads and other carriers, but experienced limited success.

The farming industry has had more success in the political arena, especially at the national level. Federal price support programs did not stem the demise of the family farm (98 percent of 21st century Americans now have the liberty to look elsewhere to enjoy the fruits of their labor), but did bring this sector more into line with the rest of an economy that is shaped by rules and regulations that do much to determine potential winners and losers, and how much of the fruits of labor are retained. Despite conservative ideological assertions that private markets are self-contained and self-regulated, all markets

are shaped by government. This has included the slavery system that was legally abolished, the type of contract law that is enforced, the degree of monopoly enterprise allowed by fitful regulation under the 1890 Sherman Anti-Trust Act, and the contemporary taxation rules that abet “rent seeking,” the off-shoring of jobs, and the sheltering of profits through creative book-keeping using off-shore assets, shell companies, and tax friendly locations in the Cayman Islands and elsewhere (Stiglitz; Blumner; Reich).

Other Social / Economic Sectors

Several 19th century examples demonstrate the wisdom of using the democratic process to provide collective goods for the general welfare of the population: the gradual extension of mandatory public education throughout the country; publically funded fire protection, clean water, and sewer services in cities; and the federal support of higher education with the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862, establishing land grant colleges. But the late 19th century also shows us what unrestricted private enterprise looks like.

After the Civil War, despite major economic downturns in 1873 and 1893, the economy grew rapidly along with westward expansion. By the turn of the 20th century, this growth had brought about vast expansions of railroads, steel production, and commercial development, but also vast discrepancies in wealth and income. This pre-income tax era is appropriately named the “Gilded Age.”

A lightly regulated economy was dominated by huge economic combinations, including “trusts,” that enjoyed vertical monopolization of major segments of the economy to the detriment of consumers. There were food and drug processors and sellers who freely sold contaminated and unsafe products. Instead of attending school, thousands of children worked

long hours in textile mills for below normal wages, thereby increasing private market efficiency and profits. Additional market efficiencies were achieved by entirely monetizing adults who would be fired if injured or missing from work because of a family emergency. There were few limits on the length of the working day or week, no minimum wage, and no retirement or health care plans for employees. In 1900 life expectancy at birth stood at 49.2 years (Moody). The reality wrought by unregulated private markets produced great wealth for a few, great misery for many, plutocratic control of government, and complete obliteration of the economic conditions for which the Founding Fathers originally established a limited government framework.

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Wealth is a social product; the mathematics of private market solutions and efficiencies cannot tell us what resources people are fairly entitled to as

humans in society or the value of what is beyond price.

The 20th century provided many opportunities for progressive truth to emerge. Examining documented experience in the light of the values from faith traditions and using that knowledge to develop policies that defined well-being in non-market terms (while also regulating noxious market patterns that exploited ignorance and necessity) enhanced life and the freedom to develop full human potential.

Aggressive investigative journalism prompted the first Roosevelt administration to begin more systematic enforcement of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act against monopoly combinations and to start setting safety standards for food and drugs. It also laid the groundwork for the 16th Amendment of 1913, which legalized a federal income tax that allowed the rich to share more fairly in the tax burden of the nation. The 19th Amendment, ratified in 1920, provided national suffrage for women.

The New Deal responses to the Great Depression of the 1930s produced (1) the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Federal Land Bank, and the Rural Electrification Authority to help farmers and rural areas; (2) the Tennessee Valley Authority and other dam projects to control flooding, to provide electricity and, along with the Works Progress Administration, to provide desperately needed work; (3) the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, the Security and Exchange Commission, and the Glass-Steagall Act regulating collusive arrangements between commercial and investment banking to make the financial system more secure; and (4) the Social Security Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act (limiting child labor, establishing hour and wages standards and a minimum wage), and the Wagner Act recognizing collective

bargaining, all helping human potentials by broadening access to the growing prosperity of the nation.

After World War II, the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (the G.I. Bill) improved access to both higher education and housing for returning veterans. The 1950s brought initial federal funding for construction of the Interstate Highway System. The 1960s produced the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations and the work place and saw creation of Medicare, Medicaid and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. By signing the Voting Rights Act, President Lyndon Johnson confirmed the truth value of equal voting rights and performed one of America's most significant acts of moral courage in spite of the political risk because, as he predicted, it would lead to party switching and election losses. The Republicans did pursue their "Southern Strategy" from 1968 to the present time and succeeded in changing the "solid south" from Democratic to Republican (Blow).

Several developments of the 1970s shaped subsequent efforts to document truth as it relates to public policy. A reorganization of federal agencies led by President Richard Nixon established the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970. Its policies have been in dispute ever since, often involving assertions from parodies of science that support efforts to outspend the truth about environmental degradations. The Pentagon Papers were published in 1971 and brought into question the truthfulness of government statements about the Vietnam War. The suspicion about government continued over the next three years as the Watergate scandal unfolded.

Conservative opposition to the progressive reform policies of the 20th century became more focused in response to a then-secret memo of September 1971 addressed to the

national Chamber Of Commerce by former tobacco company attorney and future Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell. The memo called for conservative business interests, led by the Chamber, to commit resources to influence government policy and elections, public opinion, university education, and the courts ("Lewis Powell Memo"). The results of this 40-year effort are reflected in policies enacted and positions advocated in the present day that could lead to reversal or curtailment of most of the 20th century programs reviewed above (Hacker and Pierson; Kaplan; for a contrary view, see Samuelson). But the 2008 economic crash and recent threats to the social safety net programs point to the truth value of a return to effective economic regulation and the practical value of continuing to spread longevity and health risks across a broad population (Levy).

The Present Situation

The post-WW II years from 1947 to 1973 produced a doubling of median family income during a time of strong economic growth, higher taxes, and strong unions, indicating compatibility between economic growth and economic justice (Krugman). The new millennium saw a reversal of these economic conditions as inequality distance between median incomes and the wealthy returned to levels similar to those of the 1920s (Moy; Reardon; "SOI Bulletin"), which produced problematic quality of life outcomes for children even before the economic downturn of 2008 (UNICEF).

There has been abundant evidence that military spending and governmental investment in basic research stimulated "spillover" economic growth in the developmental history of machine tools and interchangeable parts, airplane and jet engine development, space exploration and GPS technology, microelectronics, semiconductors, computer hardware and software,

the Internet, biomedical devices, the Human Genome Project, medical innovation, and even Apple-credited inventions such as the mouse, a graphical user interface, and the touch-screen (Judis). According to one private equity firm director, conservative demands for market solutions and small government have led to a decline in private investment opportunities and a decline in economic growth in recent years (Janeway).

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Although the 2009 stimulus package was ridiculed by conservatives, many of whom took credit for beneficial projects in their home states, there was an overall economic benefit, even for the \$90 billion provided for clean energy, including the much criticized \$535 million solar energy loan to Solyndra. It later came to light that this \$90 billion clean energy package

attracted \$100 billion in private investment, leading to a 600 percent increase in the solar power sector, which helped to undercut the pricing level that would have prevented the Solyndra loan default (Grunwald). In a balancing of real world positive and negative outcomes, the scale of the Solyndra loss, amounting to a quarter of one percent (.00281) of total clean energy investment, made the loan a risk well worth taking.

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Conclusion

Historical realities such as these should guide inductively derived truth for an informed, coherent, and nuanced debate about future policy risks and regulatory options: a thoughtful application of gray matter to the factual gray areas between black and white ideological extremes. The resulting discourse would comply with the George Will reality criterion; it would also avoid the “Conservapedia”³ repudiation of reality pattern used in

the Paul Ryan RNC speech, which led even a Fox News columnist to comment that it “was an apparent attempt to set the world record for the greatest number of blatant lies and misrepresentations slipped into a single political speech” (“Fox News’ Sally Kohn”). And as the “Nuns on the Bus” travels in 2012 and the calls for justice in government policies by Pope Francis in 2013 demonstrate, human reason can also guide closer approximations of normative truth by accessing traditional church teachings about social justice and applying related non-literal contemporary understandings of scripture. May these reasonable approaches to truth become more prevalent in American political discourse as the arc of progressive history continues to unfold.

Notes

1 Compare the Book of Exodus, chapters 20-22. Those pushing the Ten Commandments of chapter 20 into the public square always note their absolute nature but usually fail to note the exceptions and nuance presented in chapters 21 and 22.

2 This point is based on personal family history that was typical of mid-west dairy farming through six generations from the 1860s to the present day.

3 A Tea Party friendly English-language web based encyclopedia using conservative and Christian facts, free of corruption by liberal untruths such as the theories of evolution and relativity. Accessed at www.conservapedia.com

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