



## A (Post)-Theological Grounding for Economic Justice Work

### INTRODUCTION

Think for a moment about the costs and benefits of stealing an entire hemisphere.

Sure, there are costs: murdering several hundred million people isn't cheap, but think of the value that accrued to what we nowadays call the Eurozone, beginning in 1492 and continuing to today . . . The Falkland Islands, for example, is still a colony of Great Britain. Their anthem is "God Save the Queen" and their national motto is "Desire the Right," which might be taken in a couple of different ways!

Along the way, several of those colonies federated into what we now call the United States, a nation that soon enough immolated the European nations and began stealing its own share of the hemisphere.

The costs were large—but the financial *benefits* are incalculable. To monetize an entire hemisphere!

Here we are, in the northern part of a place called Illinois, because some part of this place was stolen from the Illini people.

I come from the southern part of this state, where much of the land was stolen from a people called the Shawnee.

I am not an innocent bystander in the cost/benefit analysis of this hemisphere. I still own a bit of family farm that was part of a federal program called homesteading, a bit of hocus-pocus in which local militias drove off the natives, allowing the Federal government to claim the land and sell it to . . . members of the local militias.

I'm going to tell you a bit of my story not because it is unique, but exactly because it is so much the story of the Southern Euro-American underclass variously known as crackers, rednecks, trailer-trash, white trash, and such like . . .

It appears that my forebears came here due to a cleaning of debtors prisons in central England. We were without question "refuse" from Europe's "teeming shores," but we didn't come here yearning to be free—we were thrown off the boat. In Maryland, as it happens in the case of my forebears.

I know this because my five-greats grandfather served in the American Revolution, and was rewarded, in lieu of pay, with land in Pennsylvania which had been—you guessed it—stolen . . . from British sympathizers. (There is a leitmotif of theft in this story.)

His children sold that land and my four-greats grandfather moved to Illinois, homesteading land recently stolen from the natives, in what is called the “Black Hawk War,” but which would be more properly called the “Black Hawk Massacre.”

The deal was forty-five cents an acre, after having lived on the land and tilling it for two years and building a “habitation.”

And that’s one of the interesting things about the European theft of this hemisphere: the take was so unimaginably and unmanageably large that even poorer adventurers got a slice of the pie. Early on.

Which goes some way toward explaining why many North Americans still today believe in what has been called our civil religion: that hard work will lead to what we call the American dream. For some that *has* happened.

The costs and benefits of stealing a hemisphere . . .

And then there’s the costs and benefits of slavery.

Scholars argue that the slave trade created capitalism, in that the logistics of capturing, transporting, and exploiting the labor of millions of people generated untold amounts of money that could be reinvested in other capital-generating ventures.

Sometime when you have nothing else to do, google around looking for the economic value of slavery. There are educated stabs at a number. But really, the number is incalculable. The fact is, the Eurozone and the US built their early-modern, industrial economies on the profits of slave trading and extracting free labor from slaves.

Reparations? General Sherman promised forty acres and a mule to freed slaves. His intention was to steal the land and the mules from Southerners. But, as Martin Luther King pointed out, that check came back marked “insufficient funds.” And has never been paid.

A couple of General Assemblies back the gathered delegates voted to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery, the “legal” basis for stealing this hemisphere.

So far, there hasn’t been any talk of returning the ill-gotten gains. Or a commitment to reparations to the descendants of slavery for their labor . . .

## ONE

Yes, I'm a cracker from the southern part of Illinois, the bit of the Ozarks that brush across the southern part of this state at the confluence of the Mississippi, Ohio, and Wabash rivers.

My father's parents were sharecroppers—yes, that institution existed north of the Mason-Dixon line, just as slavery had. Slavery also existed in the southern part of the state—Illinois was the worst offender in the “reverse” underground railroad portrayed in the film “Ten Years a Slave.”

The first military victory of General Ulysses S. Grant was the occupation of Southern Illinois to prevent the region from joining the Confederacy. We who have been there several generations have Southern roots.

My parents both grew up on subsistence farms in the southern part of Illinois before the days of electricity or running water. They were born two miles from each other but didn't meet until they were in the twenties.

My parents qualified as what philosopher Charles Taylor calls “porous selves”—the sort of people for whom life itself is as “authentic” and “real” as anybody could want.

As Charles Taylor puts it, “The porous self is vulnerable: to spirits, demons, cosmic forces. And along with this go certain fears that can grip it in certain circumstances.” Porous people are poor people; people walking life's tightrope without a social net. Taylor contrasts this condition to the “buffered self”—people with connections; expectations; and networks. Taylor says, “The buffered self has been taken out of the world of this kind of fear.”

When I talk about economic justice, it's personal: I know the cost of living and dying as my father did with a sixth-grade education, and as my mother is—she's still alive—illiterate.

They were their whole lives “porous selves,” victims of superstition; poverty; and exploitation.

Conversely, the “buffered self,” according to Charles Taylor, often becomes secular, or at least “believes” in received religions only insofar as buffered people don't wish to seek authenticity in that direction, choosing to consume other products of the culture instead. “Buffered” people are free enough, in other words, from the fear of looming, immanent privation and death to—if they (we) choose—begin examining cultural assumptions, including one's religious ideas. *If they choose.*

I hasten to add that my parents did not see themselves as victims. They were part of that “greatest generation” who transitioned from growing and killing everything they ate to getting food in grocery stores; from riding to town in a wagon to owning an automobile. Between 1945 and 1975, the average Euro-American family income doubled. My parents considered themselves “middle class.” They were proud of their achievements.

However, poor people don't stop being poor just because they have disposable income (that's my topic for Sunday morning). Social class is about assumptions and connections and networks, not about money. That's why I find Charles Taylor's "porous" versus "buffered" distinction useful. The distinction goes a long way toward explaining social class and the devastating effects of being on the low end.

My parents never became "middle class." Their standard of living went up, but their assumptions never changed.

Then, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, things began to change in US workers.

I think one statistic pretty well sums up what happened. Reflect on this: household debt in the US in 1950 was very nearly zero. The property, from farms to houses to cars, belonged for the most part to the people who had possession of them.

Today, household debt in the US is fourteen *trillion* dollars. Much of the property that people in the US "possess" today belongs to banks and credit card companies.

A young couple today born into the circumstances my parents were born into has very little chance of ever even feeling middle class. As a matter of fact, roughly a third of Americans now say they are lower class.

I go into my background because, without this incredible outpouring of wealth in the post-War years, people like me—and some of you—would never have moved from a porous understanding to a buffered understanding. My parents lived and died Pentecostal Christians. I'm a Humanist and actually changed social class. How? The answer is simple: *affordable state* university education. (And good jobs!)

Charles Taylor said: "The buffered self has been taken out of the world . . . of fear." Unlike my parents, I never faced starvation. Or war. Or educational deprivation. Or the feeling of being less-than because of my social location in US society. (Some of you are like that too . . .)

## TWO

So. The theological basis for economic justice work . . .

I'm not an economist. Being an agnostic Humanist, I don't call myself a theologian either. I'm a post-theologian.

I do enjoy history, however. And I do have suggestions about why working for economic justice is the right thing to do—maybe even the “religious” thing to do. I think it’s well summed up in a speech given on the sixth of January 1941, a State of the Union address by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. With the Great Depression winding down and a World War that would soon engulf the US, Roosevelt proposed that it was the right of every human being on the planet to have what he called Four Freedoms:

Freedom of speech and expression

Freedom of worship. (To which I would add freedom FROM worship.)

Freedom from want.

Freedom from fear.

Those, I would say, are just about as good as it gets for Humanist social values. And I believe that Humanism calls us to guarantee those values to all citizens of the nation in which we live. (And as much as possible elsewhere in the world.)

I would further argue that all Four Freedoms are economic in essence.

Nelson Mandela said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

Frederick Douglas said, “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.”

My parents and most of my relatives never had a chance at freedom, because they never had a chance to get an education. The shortest way to go from being a porous self to a buffered self is to learn how to question the assumptions of your social location. Education is about social class. Education is about social justice.

The critical thinking skills learned with education lead to freedom of religion and freedom from religion. Education is freedom. Freedom to believe and freedom to question.

The first two are freedoms guaranteed by the US Constitution—but they are, as they say, an unfunded mandate. The last two, freedom from want and freedom from fear . . . economics. Pure and simple. And the US government makes little attempt to achieve them for its citizens. Until we do, we aren’t doing justice.

## THREE

Boom and bust cycles have been part of the US economy from the beginning. We all remember 2008. Many of us remember the recession of the mid-80s or the rampant inflation of the 1970s. Some of us remember the severe recession at the end of the 1950s. A few remember the Great Depression, when roughly one-third of all US banks failed, leading to a collapse in the amount of money available in the economy and ultimately to twenty-five percent unemployment and a world war.

But booms and busts and panics went on in this country way before that. One of the interesting things about our boom-bust cycles here in the US is that the big ones occur rarely enough that many people forget, or never know, about the severity of the last one. Yet there were five major recessions in the Nineteenth Century, falling into a pattern of roughly twenty year intervals.

What has come to be known as the Panic of 1837 came about for much the same reasons as the 2008 panic: easy credit and real estate over-valuation—further fallout from the stealing the hemisphere.

The US economy was, to put it mildly, “over-exuberant” in the years leading up to 1837. In the event, roughly one-quarter of all banks failed between 1837 and 1845, again leading to a massive collapse in the amount of money available in the economy. Unlike the Franklin Roosevelt government in the 1930s, the Martin Van Buren government of the 1830s did nothing in the way of intervention into the free market. And large-scale unemployment and starvation was the result.

A cursory look at US history shows that every US citizen, from the beginning of our republic, has found her or himself betting on a disconcerting roulette game without much choice in the matter.

My father found himself born into a sharecropper’s shack just before the Great Depression; then found himself drafted into the largest war in our nation’s history, the outcome of which raised his standard of living; and at his life’s end he found himself engulfed in the financial collapse of 2008.

On the other hand, I, as a Baby Boomer, found myself born into the one of the largest economic expansions in human history, when even the children of farmers and factory workers could get an education.

My children, Millennials, found themselves, on average, going into \$50,000 in student loan debt for the education I was able to work nights and weekends to pay for. Plus, I was able to give them thousands of dollars, while my parents could manage to mail me a twenty dollar bill once in a while. Still, my kids sank into debt.

The Millennial generation also found themselves in a labor market that no longer provided the types of jobs I took for granted when I got my college education: a job that paid a living wage, provided health insurance, and provided for retirement. Gone.

Between the lottery of who our parents will be and the dumb luck of when we're born and then the random rewards of an economic roulette wheel, no wonder we Americans look a little dazed. We become conditioned to the assumption that booms and busts are like the weather. But . . . they are not.

Our economic system is full of surprises. And inequities. And downright theft.

So that's my first point in a (post)-theology of economic justice: Every person deserves to be a buffered self. That is, a person enjoying Roosevelt's Four Freedoms.

I say this because, as a Humanist, I don't believe there is a god or gods that favor one person over another or one nation over another. In the United States we owe our relative wealth to some people who have been severely, even savagely, wronged. One way we can go about paying that debt is to level the playing field for their ripped-off descendants.

That's point one in my (post)-theology of economic justice. Everyone—everyone by dint of being human deserves those Four Freedoms.

## FOUR

Ralph Waldo Emerson lived through the Panic of 1837 and had this to say:

I see a good in such emphatic and universal calamity as the times bring, that they dissatisfy me with society . . . when these full measures come, it then stands confessed—society has played out its last stake; it is checkmated. Young men have no hope. Adults stand like day laborers, idle on the streets. None calleth us to labor. The old wear no crown of warm life on their gray hairs. The present generation is bankrupt of principles and hope, as of property. I see man is not what man should be. He is the treadle of a wheel. He is a tassel at the apron string of society. He is a money chest. He is the servant of his belly. This is the causal bankruptcy, this is the cruel oppression, that the ideal should serve the actual, that the head should serve the feet.

Emerson was clueless in this instance: adversity *does not* build character. A government truck pulled up to my grandparent's shack in 1935 and dropped off some surplus food—stale bread and a jar of mustard. My dad was one of thirteen kids. My dad was the first generation to grow up on what was then known as “relief.” When my grandfather died in the late 1960s, we counted up that I had sixty-four first cousins. Of those, I'm the only one who ever got a college degree. I was the only one who transitioned from a porous to a buffered self. Most of them are dead.

Because poor people don't live as long. My generation now has great-grandchildren—and many of them are still dependent on the government dole.

Adversity *does not* build character. Poverty should be listed as a mental disorder. Poverty isn't reversed merely by giving someone money. I had a cousin who was hurt in a coal mining accident. One-hundred percent disability. He got a fairly large settlement check. He went out and bought a Jaguar—the spots car. Six months later he wasn't able to pay the insurance on the car, let alone the upkeep. He got money; he remained poor.

Poverty creates a porous self. A self that fears and feels deprived. So, the second point in my (post)-theology of economic justice is this: The opposite of poverty is not wealth, it is justice. Sure, wealth can promise the Four Freedoms to people. But wealth is a by-product, not a goal. The opposite of poverty is the Four Freedoms.

Emerson was clueless because he was a buffered self—protected by social class and education and social connection and assumption. The Four Freedoms. Justice means everyone has these protections.

In another essay Emerson says, “We become what we think about all day long.” I think that's informative concerning what we are doing to our fellow human beings who live in poverty: they think about survival all day long. Mere survival.

## FIVE

The third point in my Humanist (post)-theology of economic justice is that we are all in this together.

Ecologist Garrett Hardin coined the term “tragedy of the commons” to express the danger of allowing autonomous individuals to make decisions that affect everyone. He was against giving (poor) women the right of choice concerning having children. That was his idea of dangerous autonomy.

Nineteenth Century British economist William Forster Lloyd had used the metaphor of a commons to examine the dangers of allowing unfettered use of common property, the so-called commons in British villages.

Lloyd used the example of cattle and sheep both grazing on the common. Since sheep eat the grass down closer to the ground than cattle, sheep deprive cattle grass. Lloyd claimed that it is in the interest of sheep herders to increase the number of sheep they graze, effectively robbing the cattle herders of the commons.



On the other hand, argued Lloyd, when a pasture is in *private* possession, increasing the numbers does not increase profit if the profit is offset by loss in productivity.

This was an argument for private ownership made to justify the Inclosure Acts that took common land and placed it in the hands of private landowners.

The problem with the “tragedy of the commons” argument this is that there is *no evidence* that there were any tragedies of the commons. Ever. In fact, commons were seldom owned by everyone. Furthermore, there were usually rules governing what—and how many—could graze the common.

Economist Elinor Ostrom won a Nobel Prize in Economics because of work debunking the “tragedy of the commons” myth.

She wrote,

What is missing from the policy analyst's tool kit—and from the set of accepted, well-developed theories of human organization—is an adequately specified theory of collective action whereby a group of principals can organize themselves voluntarily to retain the residuals of their own efforts.

“Collective action.” Collective . . .

*New York Times* economics columnist Robert Frank argues that Charles Darwin, not Adam Smith, will direct economic thinking in the future.

Adam Smith claimed that self-interest leads to public good. Natural selection claims that we evolved to *cooperate*. Now we know that we are NOT individualist-maximizers of the sort Adam Smith imagined. We are “cooperators.” This impulse has been stifled, especially in the US, but human nature is to cooperate.

Adam Smith was looking at his small corner of the world as it reaped the benefits of savage colonialism; a barbaric system of slavery; and an industrialization that would destroy the health of citizens and the planet.

“Behavioral economics” proves that we do not make rational economic decisions for the most part. Charles Darwin, not Adam Smith, has shown us how to do economics.

Freedom from fear and freedom from want lifts all boats.

Adam Smith was simply wrong in his claim that individual greed aggregates into public good. Individual greed may have been the reason for a prosperous Great Britain at the end of the 1700s. But the prosperity of a few in Great Britain came at the cost of British farmers and laborers; at the cost of an entire hemisphere that sank into murderous barbarity; at the cost of the continent and people of Africa.

My fourth point in a post-theological ethics of economics: Greed is *not* good.

## CONCLUSION

Diversity and inclusion are rallying cries among Unitarian Universalists. Yet Unitarian Universalism remains a mostly Euro-American movement among the well-educated and the economically safe. Buffered individuals, in other words.

Why does Unitarian Universalism fail to speak to porous individuals? Because buffered people and porous people have a great deal of difficulty speaking to each other.

I loved my parents. My parents loved me. Why couldn't we understand each other? Because, as Charles Taylor said, "The porous self is vulnerable: to spirits, demons, cosmic forces. And along with this go certain fears that can grip it in certain circumstances. The buffered self has been taken out of the world of this kind of fear."

My parents and I lived in different worlds. And, until every person enjoys the Four Freedoms, we will not communicate across that chasm. My cousins will keep voting against their self-interest. Keep holding jingoism and racism tightly. They need out of the cage of poverty and ignorance.

Unitarian Universalists **MUST** embrace restitution for lands stolen and labor robbed.

Unitarian Universalists **MUST** embrace *redistributive* justice. (And mean it!)

It all comes down to economics. It all comes down to systemic change. Money affects every moment of every day of every life. If you don't know this, you have never been poor.

Many believe that Karl Marx said "religion is the opiate of the people." Marx did not say that. What Marx *did* say is considerably more interesting:

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

Marx went on to say,

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.

I'll repeat that: "The criticism of religions is ... in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo."

I think Karl Marx would have been the last person to condone the abolition of religion that occurred after the Communists took power in Russia. On the contrary, Marx argues that religion will die when the "condition that requires illusions" dies.

The facts do appear to bear this out. In nations where the standard of living is high, religion loses its appeal. No fuss. No bother. No burning churches or outlawing this or that. When people find that the world has real heart and soul, they stop sighing. And they stop going to church in large numbers.

When people achieve those Four Freedoms, when people transition from porous to buffered, they stop sighing. And stop going to church.

Take Russia as an example. In 1991 as the Soviet Union crumbled, Russians who identified with the Russian Orthodox Church—the former state religion before Communism—stood at thirty percent. Today, the percentage is seventy-two percent. Wow! Russians have rushed back to church, right?

Uh, no. In 1991, two percent of the Russian population attended church at least once a month. Today attendance stands at a whopping . . . seven percent. That's an astronomical rise . . . in a minuscule number.

I suppose it's a maxim: you can give people religious freedom, but you can't make them attend church. When people achieve real happiness, they drop their illusions. The Four Freedoms . . . make people free.

This weekend, let's consider an economics that factors in Darwin and real human nature.

Let's imagine an economics that ignores national borders and the old tribalisms.

Let's imagine an economics that *addresses* and *redresses* old wrongs—slavery, cultural theft, wage theft, racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, white privilege.

Let's imagine an economics that gives people freedom

of speech and expression

of worship. (and freedom FROM worship)

freedom from want

and

freedom from fear.

It's a crazy dream. But the thing is, *we* have it! Let's figure out how to share. With everyone. Just because. Just because everyone deserves that freedom.

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Jag Bhahalla is an entrepreneur and writer. He recently published on economics on his blog [errorsweliveby.com](http://errorsweliveby.com). What he says rings true for me.

Capitalism does irreparable damage to social fabric. Not only does currency replace barter as the central economic transaction, but capitalism eventually monetizes most human interactions.