

# Liberty and Community Go Together

*Written by Jeffrey Tucker.*

“If God is so great, why did he make grapes and wheat instead of wine and bread?”

The Rabbi asked the question as part of a wedding ceremony I attended this weekend.

I already had the answer in my mind: because God wants us to work with our human hands.

This was not the answer the Rabbi quoted from the Talmud.

“Because God wants us to learn to cooperate with others in order to live better lives.”

And it is true: no one person can perform well all the tasks that are necessary to turn grapes to wine and wheat to bread. Attempting to do it alone leads to frustration, exhaustion, and deprivation. Working with others makes everything much easier and more morally satisfying. We discover value in others and feed off the value they discover in us.

Why tell this riddle as part of a wedding? Because we were witnessing the coming together of two lives, a union of love, backed by an intention of mutual support, two people who have found value in themselves by discovering it in another special person. It was entirely appropriate. Two individuals have become a community – people working together for a common end.

## **Love and Markets**

The popular characterization of markets is exactly the opposite of the moral forces underlying markets. But the meaning of this insight goes beyond nuptials. There is a form of community that is the whole basis of the market economy. It is an extended network of human relationships worked out in peace and mutual agreement. So far as we know, the capacity to form such cooperative relationships is distinct to the human experience.

Roger Scruton goes further to describe such relationships as the evolutionary basis of what we call morality:

*Morality is like a field of flowers beneath which the corpses are piled in a thousand layers. It is an evolved mechanism whereby the human organism proceeds through life sustained on every side by bonds of mutual interest.*

As the market economy grows more sophisticated, it develops price signals that help with calculating profits and losses. It develops interest rates that assist in signaling the best approaches to investment. The extended order can appear highly complex, powerful, and even detached from human concerns.

And for this reason, people who can't see below the surface have long attacked the market for being rooted in individual greed, selfishness, and the desire to screw over your neighbor. They see competition as a terrifying force that rewards the few at the expense of the many. This whole characterization is exactly the opposite of the moral forces underlying markets.

You can look at Wall Street, the lives of the 1%, the mind-boggling complexity of financial markets, and imagine anything you want. But the truth is that all these institutions and signals distract us from the root of all market institutions: human relationships. The market rewards us for meeting new friends, reaching beyond our immediate family members, putting aside biases and tribal feelings, cultivating personalities that are active and outgoing, being creative in finding new ways to work with others toward common ends.

Contemporary nationalism is not authentic community. The market specializes in finding new and better ways of doing this. But it doesn't do this automatically, like some machine operating independent of human will. It achieves this because it enables all of us to act on our dreams, and to test those dreams against the volition of others. We must persuade others to go along, whether to work with us, invest in our product or service, or purchase it with an exchange of their property for our property.

The market is our opportunity to grow personally and live better lives. And it achieves this very thing for millions and billions of people every day. In premodern times, when the market was limited, our tools were primitive and the world was dominated by top-down forms of authoritarian control. Then, opportunity for people simply was not there.

For hundreds of thousands of years, human experience knew not the idea of progress. You were what you were born to be and nothing more. Surviving was enough.

The development of the market economy changed that. It ennobled the human mind, human work, and gave life and reward to the capacity to get along with others, cooperating on an ever greater scale, even unto all ends of the earth.

### **Market vs. National Community**

The longing for some connection to others seems to be an intractable feature of the human experience. We want to find meaning beyond our own ego, some sense of worth that is not limited to our self understanding. We want our lives to be bigger than we alone can make them. And this impulse can be turned to good or evil.

The market has met this need in so many ways, but it is not the only institution competing to give us this. We have other forms of identity that all matter: language, geography, race, and religion all form parts of our sense of self as it relates to others. The question is whether we want to turn these conditions into full-blown ideologies.

Here is the modern basis of what we call nationalism. As Ernest Renan explains, it is a false form of community organized around one of these four identity marks. Wherever you find it, you can observe some toggling going on between these four marks.

The rise of American nationalism right now is a case in point. The opponents of Trump say that his regime is about race. No, it's about religion. No, it's about geographical exclusion. No, it's a form of language imperialism. Actually, it's all of these really, not one consistently or completely. Whatever it is, it absolutely must rely on forced forms of community rather than voluntary ones.

What matters is what contemporary nationalism is not. It is not a voluntary extension of the longings of the human heart: "self determination," in the language of 19th-century liberalism. It becomes raw statism, a false form of community that is antithetical to our highest longings.

Albert Jay Nock put the point clearly: "As a general principle, I should put it that a man's country is where the things he loves are most respected. Circumstances may have prevented his ever setting foot there, but it remains his country."

Just as true love requires more than one, neither liberty nor community can long exist without the other. This is especially true in the 21st century when hardly anything around you has been produced in one geographic territory, by one race, by people of one religion, by people who speak only one language. The market has managed to create for all of us a form of global community of astonishing diversity, bringing people together who otherwise would have no connection to each other.

But, say the skeptics, we don't actually know these people. True, which makes this form of community all the more magical. We have entered into relationships, meaningful ones for our lives, without personal knowledge of every member. That is the hardest kind of community, a group whose members serve each other without no further knowledge. Here we find the basis of a truly lasting peace and rising prosperity. It could never happen if we had to know everyone with whom we had some relationship. Under those conditions, we never achieve greatness. (The groom in the wedding actually wrote in detail about this topic.)

## **True Love**

The wedding ceremony I attended was so beautiful, so inspiring, and there wasn't a person

in attendance who wasn't enormously happy for the couple. Two people found each other and discovered through each other a higher purpose for their lives than they could otherwise experience on their own. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

This is the most intimate, distilled, and aesthetically compelling version of what the market economy has done for all over us, all over the world, every day. It is working daily to make everyone more valuable to everyone else. Liberty alone has created community. Just as true love requires more than one, neither liberty nor community can long exist without the other.

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