

Racial Polarization Is Poison

Be they “left” or “right,” those who agitate for racial polarization seem to have no sense of the harm they could do to everyone in our society. As the wise Glenn Loury would say, they are playing with fire. By *polarization*, of any kind, I mean more than merely a vigorous disagreement over issues or even basic principles. That’s fine. Rather, I mean something dogmatic, obsessive, and fanatical, in which virtually everything in the world is seen through a single lens and everyone is expected to act and speak in a certain way, with stern consequences for the noncompliant.

It can happen in politics, but it is becoming especially common with race, where some would have us interpret virtually everything through a racial prism. This is more than simply unfortunate; it threatens what the ancient Greek philosophers and later philosophers such as Spinoza — whose 389th birthday (Nov. 24, 1632) we marked this week — held to be the good life for human beings; it’s the conception of life in which being virtuous is seen as constitutive of happiness, or better: eudaimonia, and not separate from happiness or merely means to it.

Racial polarization threatens this not just in the obvious way, namely, with the potential holds for violence. I’m thinking of the more subtle way: through the narrowing and undermining of all sorts of social cooperation.

Formulators of the original (classical) liberalism, which has been refined into the libertarian political philosophy, took to heart what the Greeks and their intellectual descendants emphasized, namely, that we human beings are inherently social animals. Some went even further to note that, as reason- and language-bearing creatures, we thrive best when surrounded by people who exhibit their rationality in the fullest sense, not only as a tool to judge means but ends as well. Only in such a milieu can we live in ways most proper to rational animals, that is, with reason always in the driver’s seat. This entails, among other things, dealing with people through argument, persuasion, and consent rather than command, manipulation, and force.

A key way that social existence promotes individual flourishing is cooperation, which augments our otherwise weak individual capacities. While no collective brain exists, liberal society creates something analogous to it. As a result, we each gain access to an incredible volume of knowledge — moral and otherwise — any morsel of which we might never have thought up or encountered while living alone or in small groups during our limited lifespans. The marketplace of ideas is an example of this process that benefits us all beyond measure. In this day when free speech and free inquiry are increasingly under assault from reckless elements left and right, this would be good to remember.

The benefits of the broadest possible social cooperation are also abundant in the material realm. The early liberal political-economic thought demonstrated that living in isolation was to live in abject poverty. No one was better at pointing this out than Frédéric Bastiat, the 19th-century French liberal. In the opening chapter of his unfinished magnum opus, *Economic Harmonies*, he wrote:

It is impossible not to be struck by the disproportion, truly incommensurable, that exists between the satisfactions [any] man derives from society and the satisfactions that he could provide for himself if he were reduced to his own resources. I make bold to say that in one day he consumes more things than he could produce himself in ten centuries.

What makes the phenomenon stranger still is that the same thing holds true for all other men. Every one of the members of society has consumed a million times more than he could have produced; yet no one has robbed anyone else....

We should be shutting our eyes to the facts if we refused to recognize that society cannot present such complicated combinations in which civil and criminal law play so little part without being subject to a prodigiously ingenious mechanism. This mechanism is the object of study of political economy.

If this was true in 1850, what would Bastiat say about our time? Think of all the things we have access to in the developed world, even those of modest means. (The people of the developing world want the same, which shows the cruelty of so-called climate policy, which would raise the price and reliability of energy.) The point which shouts from Bastiat's passages is that we have much to lose if social cooperation were to break down or even narrowed. Society *is* exchange, as the liberals hammered home on many occasions. "Society is concerted action, cooperation," Ludwig von Mises wrote in his grand treatise, *Human Action*, which he was tempted to call *Social Cooperation*, another name for specialization through the division of labor and knowledge.

Need more be said about the threat from racial and other deep polarization? To invoke another original liberal, Adam Smith famously wrote that the division of labor is limited by the extent of the market. The fewer the people with whom to cooperate, the more primitive the division of labor. And the more primitive the division of labor, the poorer we are. That should require no elaboration.

When social distrust is sown among groups, particularly on the basis of spurious identity considerations, a great deal of what we value but take for granted is put at risk. This doesn't mean that America's history of slavery, Jim Crow, and less formal forms of racism can't be taught and discussed frankly. They must be. But the cost will be unspeakably severe if frank conversation about the past and even aspects of the present transmogrify

into polarization, hatred, and distrust.

Good people everywhere should speak out against polarization. Think about what we all have to lose. And once it's lost, there may be no getting it back.