THE DAILY

The Official Cardus Blog

Volume 1 Issue 14 | March 19 - 23, 2012 | www.cardus.ca/blog

What's a Soul Worth?

—Brian Dijkema—

> A market economy is a tool—a valuable and effective tool—for organizing productive activity. A market society is a way of life in which market values seep into every aspect of human endeavor. It's a place where social relations are made over in the image of the market.

These are the words of Michael Sandel, a professor of political philosophy at Harvard university. His article "What Isn't for Sale?" is featured in *The Atlantic* this week and asks some important questions:

> What role should markets play in public life and personal relations? How can we decide which goods should be bought and sold, and which should be governed by nonmarket values? Where should money's writ not run?

What it doesn't note is that the former editor of *Comment* magazine, Gideon Strauss, made this exact same argument seven years ago:

> We believe markets to be the best way—no, the *only* sane way—to structure interactions in economic life. Markets as the proper setting for economic interaction, for buying and selling, are in our view a feature of the structure of reality. So we flagrantly support the idea and the reality of a market *economy* . . . But this does not mean we support the idea of a market *society*—what Warren Bennis calls "a bottom-line society." Human life is not all about economics. Contrary to rational choice theory, we human beings do not make all of our decisions simply in terms of cost/benefit analyses. While economic life needs room to flourish, and needs protection from the encroachment of excessive government intrusion, it also needs limits.

Regardless of who said it first, the questions being asked by both Strauss and Sandel are more pressing now than ever. Everything from the backs of toilet seats to sex, kidneys, embryos, and wombs is for sale or rent. While this has been the case in the private sector for some time, the allure of the market is increasingly tantalizing for cash-strapped governments. Think, for instance, of my blog last week, in which the government chose to double down on the gambling market as a means of raising revenue, or of the language used by minister Kenney in his discussion of immigrants, visas and citizenship, or from an earlier blog yet, in which the government of Indiana was in turn influenced enough by the market to enter the market itself. Or, closer to home, consider the City of Toronto's consideration of billboards in its libraries. I could go on. The continual creep of markets into politics—a sphere with phenomenal coercive power—should be cause for great concern.

I recognize that this type of talk is likely to bring the libertarians out of their caves in high fever. There will be talk of individual liberty, free will, and the right to make up one's own mind about how to maximize pleasure so long as it does not cause harm. As Sandel notes,

> Markets don't wag fingers. They don't discriminate between worthy preferences and unworthy ones. Each party to a deal decides for him- or herself what value to place on the things being exchanged.

But this tendency is precisely the problem:

> This nonjudgmental stance toward values lies at the heart of market reasoning, and explains much of its appeal. But our reluctance to engage in moral and spiritual argument, together with our embrace of markets, has exacted a heavy price: it has drained public discourse of moral and civic energy, and contributed to the technocratic, managerial politics afflicting many societies today.

In their embrace of the non-judgmental character of the markets, libertarians are willing to sell their souls to the highest bidder. Of what use are souls if moral and spiritual arguments don't matter? But those who are concerned with souls recognize that there are some things that should never be sold. While everything in life has an economic aspect to it, there are some things in life more precious than gold.

The Games of Yanks and Canucks

—Robert Joustra—

If there are two cultural artifacts that showcase the distinctives between Americans and Canadians, it is surely these two board games: Monopoly and Poleconomy. What the devil is Poleconomy, you ask? Obscurity is, of course, parcel to many a Canuck inheritance.

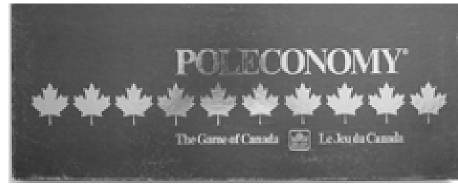
Not long ago I was enjoying an evening meal with the monks at St. Gregory's in Three Rivers, Michigan, and the text being read for the evening was a cultural history of the Cold War as told through Monopoly. Over their spartan supper, I learned that Monopoly has become one of the most powerful, influential games in the world. The concomitant rise of its narrative, competitive capitalism, has mirrored American cultural and political ascent. It is a game predicated on the fictions of level playing fields, impartial chance, limited intervention, and the ingenuity of market competition. Victory in Monopoly also spells disaster for capitalism, an ironic tension that now seems to be eternally nestled in the American psyche.

Imperfect and reductionist as it might be, the American century was also Monopoly's century.

We had Monopoly at home in rural Ottawa, but it was a distant second to Kiwi-inspired Poleconomy, a game that introduced everything from bond markets, to inflation, to major Canadian companies and advertising agencies. Far from the fictions of free markets its very name is the merger of "politics" and "economy." People get elected as Prime Minister, those people control the inflation rate, the tax rate and so forth. Inflation and taxes are not unlucky Chance cards players try to avoid, but central to the game play.

And here's the real kicker: Canada's game of capitalism, undoubtedly a pinko-interventionist corruption of Monopoly, was introduced not by radical statists but, in fact, by Canada's free market, virtually libertarian think tank, the Fraser Institute.

In Fraser's 25-year retrospective, it attributes the sale of Poleconomy to a Canadian market as one of two development ideas which saved the finances of the organization in 1980s. Michael Walker took a leave of absence from Fraser in order to sell both the corporate squares on the board, and to market the game itself. Poleconomy's sales not only stabilized Fraser's finances, but eventually scaled to form an endowment.



The differences between Monopoly and Poleconomy are instructive, especially with Canada's federal budget fast approaching. Canadians expect government to intervene, to take action in the economy. We have a high view of our politics, far more than setting the rules of the game. We expect a government that is monitoring, tweaking, and intervening in productive ways. And we hold our governments to account for the performance of the market, as prudent managers. A flagging economy is a failure of a governing party in Canada in the way that it never will be in America, if only because American market sentiment is more mystical, more decentralized, more individual.

Yet while Canadians may expect more from their government economically, that is also where Canadian expectations largely begin, and end. And in an era where economic choices are increasingly moral ones, not merely managerial or prudential, this Canadian government, and this federal budget, may have to borrow a page from America's political rulebook.

It's no longer enough just to nudge inflation, and smartly project G.D.P., especially on the multi-generational track of sacrifice it will take to salvage our global and national economy. Now we'd like to know why, if only to decide what can be sacrificed, and what never should be.

Monopoly and Poleconomy are imperfect analogies. Both speak to the power of the capitalist narrative, its internal tensions, its liabilities, and its expectations for political and moral life. Both are fictions. And, perhaps most ominously, both fictions must be overcome by their native lands if the one central icon they venerate—the capitalist markets—are to recover.

In Praise of Deliberation

—Ray Pennings—

The Republican primaries are dragging on. Candidates Santorum and Gingrich are now publicly musing about forcing a "brokered convention." It might mean the delegates at the Republican convention in Tampa in August will cast meaningful ballots rather than being stage props in a political marketing exercise. But that's not likely. Given that the last winning Presidential nominee to win his party's candidacy at a brokered convention was Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, one understands that political self-interest will probably trump that dramatic possibility.

This weekend in Toronto, a similar, but much less consequential, convention will take place in Toronto. Canada's federal New Democratic Party—a party with socialist roots which for the first time in its fifty year history won official opposition party status in last May's election—is choosing a new leader. Until a decade ago, Canadian political parties typically chose their leaders through delegated conventions where the decisions were truly made on the convention floor. There are now various systems at work. In this week's NDP race, all 125,000 members are eligible to vote either through a mail-in ballot, on-line, or at the convention. It's an experiment and depending on how many vote in advance, the convention may be decisive or it may amount to little more than a PR exercise in which the convention is simply a venue for some public arithmetic and fanfare introducing the winner.

Apart from political junkies, I doubt many people lament the decline of significance of the political convention. However, Scott Reid's "lament for a convention" in the Ottawa Citizen last week highlights several valid arguments as to why the conventions of yesterday had more to offer than ugly smoke-filled backrooms which seem to subvert democracy. In fact, the case might be made that in spite of appearances to the contrary, convention decision-making improves democracy.

The debate is about more than political voting processes. It really unmasks a larger cultural trend in which group decision-making has become about counting the results of individual decision-making rather than anything that resembles a deliberative process. There is something fundamentally different about a group decision in which each individual comes to his or her own conclusion in whatever isolated process they choose and a decision that emerges from a group dynamic of consensus building. There is something about the give and take, in real time, in the same room, that improves our understanding of an issue and moves towards improved decision-making. A healthy debate involving people who care, who may begin arguing different options but through the process of questioning, testing, and even highlighting the weaknesses of each, move to a consensus opinion is too rare.

Where does that happen these days? Informally on occasion, but for the most part, we have become too individualistic to even bother sparing the time and energy such formal processes require. Not only in political spheres, but increasingly in the organizations I belong to (including church settings) there is an increasing desire to skip the meeting (we're too busy for that) and revert to on-line conversations or decision by polling.

I will be watching with interest this weekend to see how many NDPers, a committed lot of politicos, forgo the temptation to mail in their results but actively engage in real time decision-making. It may be a little more messy politically, but it is a healthy process that is good for democracy and will likely lead to a better decision.

From the Personal to the Public to the Political

—Richelle Wiseman—

For me, there was one bright light in last week's dismal omnipresent verbal trench warfare in the political sphere.

I attended his lecture at the University of Calgary. He was in the city to collect this year's Calgary Peace Prize, awarded by the university's Consortium for Peace Studies. His name is Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, though he is more commonly known now as "the Gaza doctor", whose life was shattered when the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) shelled his home during Operation Cast Lead in 2009, killing four family members. A Harvard trained gynaecologist who worked side by side with Israeli doctors in a Tel Aviv hospital, Abuelaish's response to this tragic and horrific loss has earned him worldwide respect and admiration.

He does not mince words about the plight of the Palestinians, particularly in Gaza. He was born and raised in the Jabalia refugee camp, and received a scholarship to study in Egypt, and London. Though he worked in Israel in 2009, he still lived in Gaza, and witnessed the grisly aftermath of two mortars hitting his house which left three of his daughters and one niece dead. One daughter was decapitated, and the limbs of another were in pieces around the room.

Yet he maintains a steadfast commitment *not* to hate, *not* to resort to revenge, *not* to retaliate, *not* to seek the destruction of "the enemy", indeed *not* to see Israel as the enemy. Though he is now a professor of medicine at the University of Toronto, he maintains close contact with his Israeli colleagues in the hospital in Tel Aviv.

"The biggest weapon of mass destruction is hate," Abuelaish said that evening, emphasizing that it is the human heart consumed by hate which is the enemy of us all.

Abuelaish has made a remarkable commitment to work, live, and act for constructive peace, and not join the host of haters who perpetuate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Most people in Abuelaish's shoes would be inclined to retaliate and seek to exact revenge on the perpetrators of their misery. But his response has been to establish The Daughters for Life Foundation, to fund higher education for young Middle Eastern women. In the wake of the destruction of his personal dreams for his academically successful daughters, his personal grief and loss is being channelled into the public good.

Now he is the Associate Professor of Medicine at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto. While he vigorously pursues justice and peace in the Middle East, his strategy is to be an ambassador of hope, not hate. Where hurt and injustice and tragedy normally coalesce into hatred, Abuelaish has somehow managed a new alchemy, to turn them into hope.

"Words are stronger than bullets," he said in the lecture. "I keep my daughters alive, and I will meet them one day with a big gift, the justice and freedom of others. The foundation is how my daughters are fulfilling their dreams. This is how I am pursuing hope and not hate."

Abuelaish's speech formed a perfect counterpoint to the stream of incivility this past week in current political circles in both Canada and the U.S. The bear pit issue of the day in Canada is of course the "Robo-name-calling" scandal where insults are being hurled around by all parties in the House of Commons.

It occurred to me that while the acrimony in Canadian and American politics now goes from the political and public to the personal in a very negative way, Abuelaish is going in the opposite direction. He has taken a very personal loss resulting from the evil of warfare and conflict and transformed it into public good. It is his hope that he can model something which ultimately affects the political sphere.

His example is a remarkable antidote to cynicism, apathy, and negativity. And it inspired hope.

Just what the doctor ordered.

Michael Van Pelt, President | Ray Pennings, Publisher | Dan Postma, Editor | Kathryn de Ruijter, Design

Copyright © 1974-2012 Cardus. All Rights Reserved. The views expressed are those of the authors alone. Cardus accepts responsibility for giving them a chance to appear.