

## The Race to the Top

—Brian Dijkema—

The race to the bottom is a full-contact sport full of cheap hits and thuggery. The thugs, however, are not always easy to spot.

Take, for instance, the Canadian Auto Workers Union. Yesterday, the CAW launched a major paper entitled “Rethinking Canada’s Auto Industry: A Policy Vision to Escape the Race to the Bottom.” The report outlines policy recommendations including “buy Canadian” measures, direct government investment in the auto industry, Central Bank tampering with monetary policy to lower the Canadian dollar and encourage exports, and a host of other measures intended to “protect Canada’s share of this industry.”

Its vision claims to be all “about the community,” but in reality, it’s all about pitting one community—the Canadian manufacturing sector—against others; two in particular. This setting of worker against worker is not becoming of a trade union, but it does provide a clear picture of how some are responding to a world where assumed positions of privilege and power are being upturned. The CAW’s response shows the depth to which the capitalist metaphor of “the race”—where there are a limited amount of winners and losers—is assumed even among the left.

The first community whose head gets stepped on is workers in developing economies. Table 1 of the report cites stats that suggest almost all of the world’s developed economies’ auto sectors—think Canada, Germany, Italy, US—have declined precipitously while production in poorer countries like Mexico, Brazil, China, and India has increased. Those increases are huge; they range from a 12% increase for Mexico to a 105% increase for China.

If you place these numbers alongside wage statistics from the ILO, which suggest that wages in these same places have grown anywhere from 15% in Latin America to a whopping 109% in Asia, one wonders if the CAW is concerned about its counterpart auto workers, or whether it’s more interested in maintaining its privileged position at the head of the pack of global earners.

Further, as I’ve noted in this blog before, the interventionist policies suggested by the CAW are more likely to *jumpstart* than *solve* a race to the bottom in Canada. If we’re going to get in a mercantilist slugging match with the likes of the US and China, who is more likely to win? I’ll give you a hint from my experience in grade nine: the small guy normally takes it on the chin hardest.

But even if we were to implement the CAW’s policies, it would still mean pitting workers in one part of the country—mainly in Ontario and Quebec—against those in the booming West. Our economy, like many other developed economies, has shifted away from manufacturing. It’s replaced that with resource extraction, a sector which also keeps many manufacturers in business. This isn’t an unequivocal good, of course, but the CAW doesn’t offer any compelling reasons why auto workers should flourish at the expense of tax-paying electricians, engineers, or labourers in Alberta.

This isn’t to suggest that the CAW is completely wrong in its fears that a shift in global manufacturing will have a negative impact on workers around the world. The lack of independent trade unions and robust regulatory regimes in places like China, for instance, does not bode well for workers anywhere.

But it does suggest that there is a strong measure of self-interest mixed in the purported concern for the poor and vulnerable. If we really care about solving poverty and ensuring that workers everywhere are treated with the dignity owed them, it is incumbent upon us to acknowledge the good that is occurring in China, even if it means admitting that it comes at our expense. Moreover, this reality should cause us to search for a new metaphor for our understanding of economics. Perhaps it’s time to adopt a metaphor which recognizes that people everywhere are yoked together.

## When Reality Overwhelms Satire: What *The Hunger Games* Reveals

—John Seel—

“I’m just joking.”

We’ve all used the excuse, when a joke’s recipient takes a cutting remark meant in jest as fact. Somehow the excuse is supposed to remove the sting. But in fact all such jests always have a modicum of truth thinly veiled in the humour. It is sometimes worth examining the truth that the humour exposes.

So too this year’s blockbuster film, *The Hunger Games*. This dystopian tale of teenage blood sport has evolved in significance from cinematic blockbuster to cultural signpost. It’s broken all sorts of attendance records—the third biggest opening weekend in cinematic history. It’s the first movie to take the top spot for four weekends in a row since *Avatar* achieved this feat in January 2010. *The Hunger Games* currently ranks 22nd on the all-time domestic chart with \$336.7 million, and it should have no problem ending its run with over \$370 million box office receipts. Director Gary Ross says, “There are days where it feels like we’re in the middle of some national media event that has nothing to do with entertainment.”

The film says much about the state of North American culture. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “The test of morality of a society is what it does for its children.”

The cinematic version in contrast to the novel plays down the author’s intended cultural satire. The book is more than young-adult fiction building on the likes of Rowling’s *Harry Potter* and Meyer’s *Twilight* series. *The Hunger Games* trilogy is Suzanne Collins updating Roman poet Juvenal’s *panem et circenses* (“bread and circuses”). The inherent violence in the story’s premise is toned down in the cinematic telling to enable a PG-13 rating and thus attract a wider and younger audience. Lost in translation is Collins’ original cultural critique. Instead, the film plays like a reality TV show on steroids, *Survivor* with swords.

What is missing from the telling is any sense of outrage or disgust. Instead, Katniss Everdeen becomes the cultural exemplar of a “headstrong, self-sacrificing heroine.” Teen power rules. Elizabeth Banks, who plays Effie Trinket, gushed on a late night talk show her PC-qualifier, “Of course, we’re for peace.” Yet the entire premise of the film is based on kid-on-kid violence that would make the killing of Trayvon Martin *de rigueur*. There is great irony that the documentary film *Bully* had to

## Sit Down. Shut Up. You Lose.

—Peter Stockland—

*Globe and Mail* columnist Margaret Wentz writes thousands of excellent words a month. Almost all bring the fresh scent of common sense. Many are contrarian in a way that makes me wonder how they ever became the contrary rather than the norm.

Given her stellar record of journalistic good work, then, it seems borderline churlish then to pick nine words from today’s column as evidence of what is wrong with the world. Yet it must be done. If the greatest poet of the day walks into a bank and says the four small words “this is a stickup”, his flowing yards of iambic pentameter will not save him when the flatfoots arrive.

Just so, neither can Ms. Wentz be exonerated for writing, in an otherwise laudable and laudatory column about Danielle Smith, that Alberta Wildrose Party leader “has no interest in dragging social issues into politics.”

How could any journalist, never mind one of Ms. Wentz’s clear intellect and mastery of prose craft, write such a thing? What, precisely, would such a journalist think politics are about if not social issues?

Aristotle: “Man is an animal whose nature it is to live in a polis. . . . He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god.”

A municipal council debate over rezoning land at the corner of Pork and Beans is the mechanics of politics being put to work on a social issue. A parliamentary debate over weights and measures is the political process determining how a society calculates its goods—and itself.



Jennifer Lawrence plays Katniss Everdeen, the “headstrong, self-sacrificing heroine” of *The Hunger Games*.

be released in an unrated version so that teens could see the film, when *The Hunger Games* is based on a premise that makes bullying a mild distraction.

We need cultural satire, and with it a renewed sense of moral outrage. We must avoid being numbed to the cartoon violence of a first-person-shooter video game—*Call of Duty* for tweens. Would it not have been more culturally beneficial and honest to depict *The Hunger Games* as an NC-17 pornographic slasher film? What happens when satire loses its force as satire? When dystopia—an imaginary place or state in which the condition of life is extremely bad, as from deprivation, oppression, or terror—becomes an accepted neighbourhood within the cultural imagination, when it shifts from critique to description? When this happens, something seriously amiss is at work in our cultural psyche. This shift is what *The Hunger Games* reveals.

Ours is a culture on the verge of collapse. Sociologist Philip Rieff warns,

At the breaking point, a culture can no longer maintain itself as an established span of moral demands. Its jurisdiction contracts; it demands less, permits more. Bread and circuses become confused with right and duty. Spectacle becomes a functional substitute for sacrament.

In a footnote Rieff expands by quoting Carl Jung, “We can hardly realize the whirlwinds of brutality and unchained libido that roared through the streets of Imperial Rome. But we would know that feeling again if ever we understood, clearly and in all its consequences, what is happening under our very eyes.” This is the logic of our deathwork culture. This is the symptom this cultural artifact reveals. This time, it’s not a joke, and the cultural consequences will be real.

Oh, but of course, in the context of the Alberta election, Ms. Wentz isn’t really talking about such practical social issues. No. She means *those* social issues. You know. The “hot button” ones. The ones so abhorrent to current political discussion that we dare not speak their names. Yes, I’m talking about gay marriage and abortion.

Doubtless, Ms. Wentz would protest she was only paraphrasing, albeit approvingly, what Ms. Smith has been quoted as saying: that the limited time of a busy political party can’t be taken up talking about such purely social matters.

If Ms. Smith did say such a thing, and I don’t doubt she said something like it given the nature of her thought when we worked together at the *Calgary Herald*, then it is a compounding example of an extremely intelligent person saying something very foolish. Surely it is the job of a journalist, particularly one of Ms. Wentz’s high calibre, to twit politicians who say such foolish things. Isn’t the duty even greater when what is being said makes absolutely no sense?

For if it is too much of an imposition on a political party’s time to discuss abortion and gay marriage, how is it that the laws regarding them were changed in the first place? Did the necessary discussion occur in some kind of chronological cryogenic chamber where time itself was frozen and then restored without having passed? Or was it somehow just slipped in between teeny, tiny gaps in every political party’s busy schedule?

Uh, no. Those of us who remember as far back as yesterday recall how the proponents of such legal changes monopolized vast swathes of political debating time. Nothing, they

## The Tyranny of Extroverts

—Robert Joustra—

We now live under a kind of extrovert tyranny, says Susan Cain in her new book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can’t Stop Talking*. It has led to a culture of “shallow thinking, compulsory optimism, and escalating risk-taking in pursuit of success, narrowly defined.” In other words, short-termism continues to win the day as extroverts amplify each other’s groundless enthusiasms.

Put aside for the moment that the introvert/extrovert binary is a bit of pop psychology, fraught with reductionist silliness, leaning toward indulgent narcissism. Let’s hat tip that awkward context and move straight past it: some folks just find it a lot easier to be out going and extroverted than others. The globalization of (social) media has meant that extroverts who Tweet, self-promote, hop on airplanes, hob-nob and glad hand are a step ahead. We don’t have to look much further than the work of politics to know even in today’s information age the good ideas aren’t always the winners: it’s the repetitive, attention grabbing, electable, sexy stuff that holds the day.

There is something utterly banal about this. Extroverts have always had a social upper hand, but the difference today is that that advantage, thanks to a variety of technologies and their simultaneity, now extends to almost every aspect of life. Media scholars make a long point of the fundamental shift in the election of American presidents after the 1960 Kennedy/Nixon debate, where it became necessary for an electable American president to be not only well spoken about important ideas, but photogenic. The television actually changed why we vote for candidates, and those changes were largely in favour of extroverts.

Worse, the always controversial William Pannacker now says that tyranny has extended to one of the last refuges of the introvert: the academy. The introverted promise of the academy, in Pannacker’s judgment, is erased by pragmatic, extroverted trends in culture. Teaching has naturally always been a part of the job, but the burden of relevance and entertainment has shifted to the professor in a more profound way recently. Intellectuals are now expected to leap into conversations on immediately unfolding events, unprompted, regardless of whether they have anything of substance to contribute or not.

To an introvert, such commentary is not only an exercise in simplicity, it’s an exercise in duplicity. Real content, real thought is actually lost. Political, economic, and cultural examples of that loss now abound.

The present day is obsessed with action: let’s stop talking and do something, the pragmatist motto runs. And I’m political enough to know not everything can be sussed out before steps, especially urgent steps, need to be taken. But if even the ivory refuge of introverts is yielding its place in the shade to stop and have a good think, if even it must be reduced to bullet points and action items and publishing lists, we may indeed have arrived at a tyranny of extroverts.

claimed, was more important or more deserving of our time and full attention than their particular causes. Their claim was perfectly justified. In a democracy, those who gain the agenda are those who gain results.

But if time and attention were afforded the proponents of these “social” changes, how can those necessities be denied the opponents who maintain society has suffered because of the transformation? How can there be no equivalent political time for them to press their case? It doesn’t make sense.

Or, well, maybe it does if what is really being said in an elliptical and excruciatingly polite Canadian way is: “Sit down. Shut up. We won. You lost. Get lost.”

That would be a horribly churlish thing to say, of course, even in a polite Canadian paraphrase. Worse, its implications for democratic debate, indeed democracy itself, would be frightening. Perhaps some common sense journalist somewhere might find the words to express what would happen to us if it were to become the norm.