

On Noah Toly, “The Macondoization of the World”

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Toly’s essay has many strengths: intelligence, clarity, a recognition that political theory and religious ethics have much to say to each other, an overriding concern with the real world, and an acknowledgement of the limits to emancipation and the inevitability of suffering. Since I am in broad agreement with his basic position, I will offer sympathetic cautions concerning what might be called his theoretical “tone” and a few suggestions for additional conceptual resources.

1. Toly has a tendency to describe a political landscape in which the major actors are sets of ideas. We have environmental governance, social imaginaries, religion, Christianity, post-environmentalism, secular rationalities, and neo-classical economic thought, to name but a few. What we do not see very much of, until the last few pages, are classes and the social structures which define those classes. Where, for example, is capitalism? Or whatever system prevails in China? Or patriarchy? Or homophobia? Or anti-Semitism? Where is the sense that conflicting theories are held and implemented by groups of people situated in unequal positions of domination—and that the underlying logic of a good many of these positions are the way they express that domination? That theoretical positions are, in the traditional sense of beliefs which obscure their own causes, *ideological*. Surely Toly is aware of this, but the tone of his essay sometimes borders on the idealistic—and I intend that term in the traditional (and pejorative) Marxist sense.
2. Sartre said that he would cease to be a Marxist only when capitalism ended. Similarly, we might say that we can be “post-environmentalists” only when the environmental crisis no longer exists. But the problem with Nordhaus and Shellenberger’s fantasy is not just that it ignores tragic conflicts between conflicting rights, but that it ignores that “our” dreams of creative use of “our” power founder on the existing reality that “we” are, again, sharply divided by class. There is no “we.” A tiny fragment of the world’s population determines the use of resources, the direction of technological research, the major messages of the major media, and the exercise of violence. If occasionally, thank God, a collective power wells up from below and challenges this or that dictator, World Bank type NGO, or imperialist policy, the general rule remains one of subjugation. While we are not completely in Habermas’s

nightmare of a world divided between “social engineers and inmates of closed institutions,” we are pretty close. The dreams that are realized are largely the ones that please the elite; and will continue to be so unless a dramatic shift, requiring a massive redistribution of power, occurs.

3. Almost a century ago pioneering Western Marxist Georg Lukacs described capitalism as a combination of micro technological sophistication and macro irrationality. This is clearly manifest in recurrent boom and bust cycles, but also in the way air conditioners in cars nearly destroyed the ozone layer, the computer revolution makes us less patient and able to concentrate, pesticides kill people as well as bugs, and a stew of plastic refuse in the Eastern Pacific is the size of the U.S. Such irrationality leads us to ask: who is in charge of what is produced? Of how we are educated to relate to all the nifty gadgets? Of how much time we spend online and how much looking at the sky, learning yogic breathing techniques or visiting the sick and comforting the aged? And these questions lead us back not to tragedy but to class power.
4. Not all suffering is tragic, though we might say that the sheer quantity of suffering is a kind of tragedy. The idea of tragedy suggests inevitability: powerful and inescapable forces set in motion that which cannot be altered and which necessarily leads to pain and loss. However, I am not sure it will be tragic if those of us in the first world, who lead lives of near unimaginable comfort and self-indulgence, would have to do with less, much less. If, for instance, we adopted the World Council of Church’s policy recommendation that citizens of all countries be responsible for approximately the same amount of greenhouse gases; e.g., that the U.S. average start to “converge” with, say, the average for India or Bangladesh. Surely many people (myself included, for I drive and use electricity like everyone else) would not like this; but (for an extreme analogy) it was no “tragedy” when slave-owners lost their slaves, men found it suddenly illegal to rape their wives, or native people finally got a share of the income from resources taken from their land. A reduction in our collective selfishness to make the consequences of climate change slightly less terrible for people who never benefitted from it would hardly be tragic.
5. I certainly agree (and have said so in a variety of places) that the universal vision of respect and compassion that marks at least some of the ethical teachings of world religions is an absolute fit for a world marked by extreme economic and ecological interdependence. Yet

clearly contemporary religion in general and Christianity in particular are *also* a violent and sectarian response to the threats and hurts of this world, as well as tools for distraction and subjugation—as they have always been. This suggests that in and of itself religion may have no inherent moral or political character. Its ultimate social meaning depends on who is using it for what purpose, rather than on any original or essential nature. Therefore, just as religious teachings about universal compassion can be an essential element in a global movement of political resistance, so people of faith—if they are not to recapitulate social domination in religious guise—need to learn the lessons of social critique that have originated in secular political movements.

Roger S. Gottlieb is professor of philosophy at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. He has written widely on ethics, political theory, religious life, and environmentalism; and regularly blogs for Huffington and Patheos. His two most recent books are a collection of philosophical short stories, *Engaging Voices: Tales of Morality and Meaning in an Age of Global Warming*, and *Spirituality: What it Is and Why it Matters*.