A NEW DEAL IN STUPIDITY

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Introduction

A cursory look at Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal provides ample evidence that stupidity is indeed the learned inability to learn: That is—\(a\) normal, dysfunctional learning process which occurs when a schema formed by linguistic biases and social norms acts via the neurotic paradox to establish a positive feedback system which renders behavior irrelevant to the environment and carries detached actions to maladaptive excesses.

In the early 1930’s, Americans did not perceive giant business organizations as "Governing bodies" but as eminently successful rugged individuals. Another part of American fiction was that the nominal government in Washington had some kind of power to control events and the knowledge to do so beneficially. Actually, a private organization determined the daily life of the average citizen—when to get up in the morning, what to eat, what to wear, what working conditions would be and how leisure time would be spent. FDR changed all that. The government now goes beyond just governing. However ineffective it may be, the bureaucracy attempts to control us and virtually every aspect of our daily lives.

The other big change in thinking—\(\text{i.e.},\) a paradigm shift which occurred during the 1930’s was that the "People" were mixed into the Government=Business equation. All the regulations which had been cultivated by the business community to harness government to the promotion and development of corporations were converted into mechanisms of government regulation over the industrial complex. The change occurred for the best of reasons—it had to. The business community had been granted the license to run itself and the country into the ground and then had proceeded to do precisely that. Had necessity not been quite so compelling at the time, Americans would have been more reluctant than they were to convert from worshipping big business to worshipping big government. Rituals and jargon all favored the status morbus. The only problem was pragmatic—the system did not work. Of course, nothing the befuddled New Dealers did for eight years worked very effectively either until World War II bailed the country out of the Depression.

In a general and abstract sense, the New Deal amounted to an admission that the old beliefs in capitalism and the mechanisms by which business controlled politics worked to everyone’s worst interest. The new, emerging schema was based on belief in legislation designed to help people by limiting business. Unfortunately, the pragmatic result of FDR’s effort to surpass Wilson’s progressive warfare state was not government by law but by organization. Although the underlying principles upon which government is based may be theoretically sound, human organizations take on self-serving lives of their own. Hence, the efforts to realize our ideals by legislating control resulted in strangling business with fascistic regulations, but the president’s efforts were appreciated by some: in 1934, an expression of admiration for his “Successful battle against economic distress” was received from none other than financial analyst Adolf Hitler.

If the preoccupation here with systems and principles seems out of place, it nevertheless reflects the prevailing attitude of those who lived through the American Reformation of the 1930’s. During the Depression, people who had gone bankrupt commonly spent their working lives trying to pay off their creditors. Few groups received or even sought handouts from the government. Mostly, they were seeking explanations—new ideologies (Socialism, Communism, Fascism) to replace the ragged individualism created...
and dragged gullibly into disrepute by capitalism. Very few people with any articulate political force actually demanded bread instead of the alphabet circuses of the New Deal.

In one of the few intellectual ironies of the 1930’s, while the people were looking for reassuring answers to theoretical questions, their leader was searching for pragmatic solutions to real economic problems. As an inveterate non-ideologue, President Roosevelt was a pragmatic empiricist committed to trying one thing after another in a hit and miss fashion until he found something (i.e., WWII) that worked. Systematics aside, the government’s perceptible slide toward a fascistically controlled superstate was not well received by conservatives who clung to the belief that the cure for the crisis created by big business was big business as usual. With much righteous hand wringing and expressions of concern about the downfall of laissez faire capitalism, they feared the destruction of individual initiative and the ruin of national character, but that was the psycho/social price of saving the economic system which was kaputt. How anyone missed the fact that capitalism if not corporatism was already down and out can be attributed only to the incredible power of the “Laissez unfair” schema to prevent awareness of the most obvious facts of economic life.

The official response was big government, but unofficially, Americans redefined themselves and turned in the tarnished idol of the brazen individual seeking opportunity for that of the cautious conformist seeking security. The resultant welfare programs may have been a boon to civil service bureaucracies, but recipients of the dole, for some unexpected reason, seem to have lost a general sense of social responsibility. As irresponsibility was not the intended goal but an undesired side effect of the welfare state, it was unanticipated by those who approved and those who administered the programs. The subtlety that people given the means for subsistence tend to lose respect for everything including themselves was lost on everyone. However, after eighty years of experience with dependence on the dole, we are beginning to realize that the quest for economic security has indeed undermined our sense of individual responsibility, increased dependency, broken up families and destroyed self-respect. Physical security in our cities is subject to the irresponsible whims of vandals and hooligans showing their unbridled disrespect for property and human life.

Notes

2. Halberstam, D. 1975. The Powers That Be. University of Illinois Press; Chicago, IL. (2000). 8. The big change was that the people ceased to look to the state government as the prime effector and looked to the federal government to deal with issues and solve problems.
8. Russell. op. cit. 241. The following pages continue this theme.
10. Arnold. op. cit. 78.