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A Quarter-Century of Normalization and Social Role Valorization

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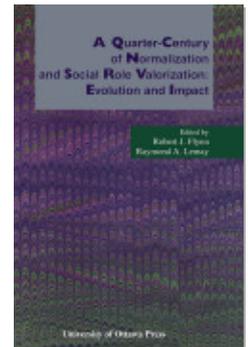
Published by University of Ottawa Press

Flynn, Robert J. and Raymond Lemay.

A Quarter-Century of Normalization and Social Role Valorization: Evolution and Impact.

University of Ottawa Press, 1999.

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Response to Professor Michael Oliver

WOLF WOLFENBERGER

(To Professor Oliver:) I have put all my comments about your comments on little red cards. I am well prepared, you see. Would you like to have some? Are they red enough?

There are some comments I want to make first, not because they are the most important ones but because they are relevant to the foregoing discussions. I happen to believe that there are a lot of universals in reality, both in the universe generally and in human experience: enduring laws, regularities, dynamics, and things that happen over and over with universal lawfulness. One such universal consists of certain regularities and patterning in human perception that are not just temporary, ad hoc, or culture-bound constructions. I was particularly struck with that when I studied the history of mental retardation and looked at people's ideas about low intellectuality—in essence, stupidity—over the millennia and across many, many cultures. I found several recurring—and even universal—patterns of perceiving low intellectuality, and of thinking about it. People did not possess terms such as “mental retardation” and “mental deficiency,” nor did they have any number of other terms and fine distinctions of classification that we now have, nor did they have our scientific knowledge on this issue. But what all did have was language for stupidity—and it was a very stable kind of language so that in some cultures, the same words were used for long, long periods, perhaps 1,000 years or more. Contrary to what some texts tell us, people were quite capable of

identifying—and discoursing on—people of low intelligence.

Furthermore, the images of, and the icons for, low intelligence also seem to have much that is universal to the human mind. For instance, the distinction between an object being sharp (like a knife) or dull is one you will find applied as a simile to intellect in language after language. Other such images found over and over include those of slowness and low viscosity. Apparently, most of these images have a basis in concrete sensory experience and were then made into something like similes or metaphors that were applied symbolically to stupidity. One other universal image of low intellectuality that befell people from childhood on—what we now call mental retardation—was that of slow mental growth, childishness, and the eternal child.

I also happen to believe that there will always be social devaluation and devalued people—in other words, that this is also a universal. *Who* it is that gets devalued, may be different from culture to culture and time to time. But *how* persons get treated once they become devalued, has remarkable universality to it across time and across cultures, and I am afraid that the negative descriptions that Professor Oliver decried—and rightly so—are, however, in good part built into the human perceptual process and cannot be talked away. We have to combat them because they are hurtful and destructive, and we can do better, but I believe that the tendency to engage in this sort of thing is built into the human mind.

So the poor “quality of life” of physically handicapped people that was mentioned does not exist because they are physically impaired, but because they are devalued by others. If one were valued, one could have all sorts of impairments and yet not experience subjectively what is now called “poor quality of life.” (By the way, “quality of life” is another of the presently popular terms that I do not use in my own language.)

So I believe that people are quite capable of perceiving all sorts of differences among human beings, though they may differ in how they value or interpret these differences. In fact, the perception of human differences also seems to have a certain hard-wired element to it. One of many reasons, I believe, is that there is something hard-wired in the human mind about ideas of contagion, contagious things, and contagious people that is, in fact, biologically adaptive and protective. There is actually empirical evidence for this belief. This should not be surprising in light of the fact that even many animal species display conspecific preferences—positive or negative—toward features of appearance.

Whenever we deal with universals, these tend to resist attempts to restrict or deny them with language, or to nail them down with one definite or technical term that does not correspond fully or adequately to people’s phenomenological experience of them: People perceive and in their minds know about what it is that they are observing. This keeps popping up with such regularity that we can draw an analogy to the phenomenon of “regression to the mean,” to pigs rooting the moment you quit beating them for it, and to cats acting like cats the moment the cat trainer relaxes the training routines. So I am a little skeptical of any Rumpelstiltskin-type attempt to control people’s minds entirely through language, as powerful as language might be in controlling perception and thought. I am convinced that there are some things that are going to defy attempts at imprisoning or “enjailing,” and certain perceptions of human characteristics and phenomena are of a nature that *will* keep breaking out. For instance, anyone who really understands human nature and is reconciled to reality knows that humans will never abandon ideas about what is attractive in other humans, and especially in members of the opposite sex. Yet I thought that such enjailing attempts were

manifested by the way Professor Oliver used the term “disability.”

Now we go to another topic. I felt a little bit like Marc Gold, who wrote a book (1980) with the title *Did I Say That?* I did not recognize myself, my writings, and my teachings in a lot of things Professor Oliver said, and a lot of people here who have been to a lot of teachings that I have given probably feel the same way. That puts me at a great disadvantage, as I hardly even know in this context where to start responding. Some things he had quite right, and could have been quoting what I had written; other things were either incorrectly attributed or incorrect interpretations. However, a big, big problem—on which we need to be very clear and which goes far beyond Professor Oliver and myself, and which is a crucial issue for SRV and for a lot of other debates—is which niveau of critique or discourse we apply to an issue.

We need to be clear that Professor Oliver has presented a critique on the religious niveau. He has expressed a worldview that is above the level of social science—a de facto religion based on assumptions of what the universe, the cosmos, human nature, relationships, and so on, are about. He has declared himself to be an adherent of the supra-empirical religion that I consider to be not only invalid, but also utopian and naive. It is, and historically has been, attended by perfectionism ideas and perfectionism cults, all of which have failed so far. But the same is true of many other religions that preach that humans are going to perfect society. Note a peculiar, illogical feedback loop here that is found in Marxism, namely, that all these people who are so imperfect as individuals are somehow going to get together and form a perfect collectivity. That is one of the things that I consider to be not only invalid, but an outright naive circularity. And in many quarters these days—in the political correctness (PC) circles particularly, but even beyond them, in the mind of modernism generally—there has been a tendency to exalt will and want: “What I would like” or “what I feel like” or “what I wish things were like” is almost the way people think that things really are or are really going to be. So in PC ideology, we see many denials of the most fundamental aspects of reality, and, above all, we see a never-ending denial of the most basic realities of human nature.

Now, as part of Professor Oliver's Marxist critique (which more recently has begun to be called materialistic critique), we have been told that human social organization is governed by economics. Again, I consider that a naïveté. What I have taught is that how people relate to each other will be very heavily influenced by what is in their minds. So whatever one can do or does to put things in people's minds, one will get bad things back, as in "garbage in, garbage out." Good things put into the mind, will yield good—or at least less worse—things coming back out. And there are many, many ways other than through economics to put things in people's minds. Why is that hard to see?

Now, more on the level of discourse. Professor Oliver has declared his religion, everybody finds that in order, and once it is on the table, we can talk about it. But not all religions are considered equally acceptable for debate, and that puts me at a disadvantage. If I talked about my religion, many people would be deeply offended, though other people with other religions would be granted the scope to critique the world of theories in terms of their religion. All this becomes even more problematic when a theory that is essentially a social science theory is critiqued from a religious niveau. That would be appropriate if the religious concept had something to say about particular social science theory, such as whether it is valid, or whether it is concordant with the religion at issue even if it is not valid, and so on. But a social science theory is in no position to critique a religion, as I believe all the epistemologists would agree. Even a very high-level social science theory is at a lower level, and you are only to critique one religion with another religion. Now you see, that is one of my dilemmas: How do I respond to Professor Oliver's religion when he invokes it to critique my social-science theory?

Well, let me first say a bit more about his religion. Materialistic religions have a basic dilemma, and that is: From where are they going to get a morality? If there is nothing but a materialistic world, you are going to have either a materialist morality—or no morality. And in my opinion, if one were coherent as a materialist, one would say there is no morality: There is only force, there is violence, and the stronger force prevails. At best, morality consists of a utilitarian set of social conventions for dealing with material reality, including other people. That is the logical ethics of

materialism. Admittedly, there have been many attempts to construct higher-level material moralities. They have all failed, and they are actually kind of ridiculous. For instance, attempts to form a morality on the basis of a materialistic biology led to social Darwinism, which led to eugenics, which led to the Nazi killing of the handicapped—a Nietzschean sort of materialistic power morality. There is a lot of logic to that when you are a materialist. Many, many other kinds of material moralities have been attempted, and as I say, I think they are all naive, and they have certainly not been successful; in fact, they have been less successful than moralities derived from any number of other religions, including some that I consider invalid.

Now, to profess my religion: It is that of a Christian personalist anarchist. I feel rather frustrated trying to tell you what that is because it would take a lot of time, and most people would not understand it readily even then. At any rate, from my religious viewpoint, social stratification is assumed to be a universal. It will always be there, at all times and in all places. It makes no difference who is on top: whether the communists or the capitalists, kings or tribal chiefs, there is going to be a stratification of power, of command, of control—yes, in part, of economics too, but even more of power than of economics. Even the smallest new collectivities will stratify very quickly, including collectivities in which economic exchange and control play no part. When you overthrow one tyrannical stratification, what you get is just a new stratification. In any of the stratifications, the people on top are going to oppress and lord it over those on the bottom. This is what my religion informs me—and, by the way, I am relieved to be able to report that this religious belief happens to be totally consistent with a universal historical empiricism, which is not the case for a lot of other religions that are utopian, such as Marxism.

My religion says that in the context of this kind of stratificatory reality, one should ally oneself in empathy with the oppressed, the lowly, and the weakest party. One does not necessarily embrace their values, or what they say, nor necessarily their goals, which might be contrary to one's own religion, such as when they pursue the violent overthrow of the oppressors and the creation of a new and different oppressive stratification. But one does stand against

whatever oppression exists at the moment. And should that oppression ever be somehow terminated (which does not happen very frequently), then one must be immediately ready to ally oneself with the new oppressed class, and against the new oppressors. Often, the oppressed under the new system are the same kinds of people as the oppressed under the previous system, but sometimes not. Maybe those who were on top will now be oppressed by those who were once the oppressed, and now one must be standing by those who once were the oppressors because now there is going to be oppressive warfare made against them.

From that perspective, I think it is extremely naive to look to Caesar for relief from oppression. Do not put your trust in princes! Caesar is always the imperial power, or is allied to it, and you will never get genuine relief from it. By definition, there will always be lowly people on the bottom, and Caesar is a major part of the control mechanism from the top. People who very naively look to Caesar for salvation will be betrayed by their idol because all idols will eventually betray their worshippers; and, in between, they will usually demand human sacrifices. So, if one expects that one can go to Caesar and get public funding for the lowly in a way that will do them a lot of good, this does not make any sense. Either Caesar is not going to fund something that is genuinely good for the lowly (maybe we think it is, but there is a catch built in that is bad for the lowly that we have not seen yet, some perversion that will soon surface), or there are strings attached. If you want something that has to do with funds without strings attached, do not ask the state, do not ask Caesar; that you have got to ask your fellow human beings to give freely. You simply cannot expect to be given money from taxes without social policy attached. You are never going to get it, ever. And again, it mystifies me how anybody can think that it can be otherwise. And the social policy that will be attached to public money will ever and always have imperial identity, with minor exceptions that often are there by accident, or for imperial purposes of image-detoxification and deception, comparable to the so-called loss leaders in advertisement, that is, the items advertised that are sold below cost in order to hook in customers. (One would think that the above logic would make anarchists of all thoughtful moral actors.)

In this connection, I want to tell those of you who put so much hope into the new situation in South Africa that I do not think you have pinched yourselves yet, or done so in the right parts of your anatomy. In all likelihood, based on the way human beings are, you are going to see bloodshed—possibly worse than anything that preceded it under the Boer and Caucasian management. You will probably see events comparable to those in Rwanda, and maybe worse, and I would like to have on record all the current utopian exclamations of how wonderful things will be in South Africa, because so often, later on, when reality overtakes wishful thinking, people deny that they believed or said these things.

And that brings me to the issue of violence. As a Christian personalist anarchist, I do not believe in violence and force by anyone, against anyone, for any purpose, or by any means. My anarchism is different from most other anarchists' anarchism in that it is not one that seeks to destroy power with violence and force, but one that calls for taking a nonviolent position against it regardless of what happens to one, fully aware that one will be persecuted, and that in a certain sense of *realpolitik*, one will be defeated. Those with the swords will use their swords, but the victory of the people who embrace nonviolence for moral and religious reasons is in another realm—a moral and spiritual realm, which is much “realer” and more enduring.

Also, there are never going to be armies of handicapped people with planes, guns and cannons, and in control of the food depots in a chaotic world. There are not going to be any large and/or long-lasting coalitions among all sorts of devalued groups with each other—because they devalue each other too much, which is a universal. Hopes or predictions to the contrary are once again fantasies (including Marxist ones), and come with the kinds of false promises that all idolatries make, but that will inevitably end in a betrayal by the idols. Neither what Professor Oliver would like to see will happen, nor what I would like to see.

Decades ago before my worldview had matured, I thought Normalization was going to “win,” or something like that, but not for very long. That change

in view was, in fact, one of the reasons why I became treated as an alien in my field, as I told you this morning. What I want, and what Normalization/SRV or any number of other things might achieve, or even what my religion would tell me we should want for this earth and its people, is not going to happen. This is a dysfunctional—I would say a fallen—world. It is imperfect, it will remain imperfect, human beings will remain imperfect, violence is laid not only into our bodies but also our souls, incoherency is laid in our minds and identity, and we are going to oppress. As

individuals, we can and should strive to minimize and oppose these impulses in ourselves and others, to behave as moral actors, assuming a personal moral responsibility for one's behavior regardless of whether others also do so, and regardless of what happens, usually opposing oppression but sometimes stepping aside when both opposed parties are deeply in the wrong. But there are not going to be utopian solutions, no nirvanas, no problems laid forever to rest, and only the most fleeting occasional abeyance in oppressive social stratification.

REFERENCE

- GOLD, M. (1980). *“Did I say that?”: Articles and commentary on the “try another way” system.* Champaign, IL: Research Press.

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