Why the Center Can't Hold: A Diagnosis of Puritanized America

Tom O’Neill

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We confront with wholesome skepticism those who say the sky is falling. People have been saying it since the invention of speech—and the sky is still there. Sound enough. Yet the danger of this skepticism can be that even when something is going awry systematically, we may tend to greet each indication as a mere oddity. True, one should not treat the first sneeze as a predictor of pneumonia. But when sneeze follows sneeze, and the throat clogs, and the lungs register congestion, one must at some point acknowledge the onset of illness. That moment of doing so is a positive one; without it one isn’t likely to take corrective action.

Today evidence of something going wrong shows up in many places. Consider education for instance. Granted, education is always problematic. Knowledge maketh a bloody entrance. And the effort to set aside immediate concerns for the sake of cultivating more general understandings has always been subject to thoughtful objection. A decision to postpone immediate improvements (say, re-tiling the kitchen floor) to seek a broader understanding of life is open to the charge of impracticality. Add to that that our nation, from the time of its first settlement by Europeans, has been always the site of urgency at some frontier. Our sense of the urgency of things has contributed toward a specifically American form of anti-intellectualism. “He who hesitates is lost.” Let’s get this show on the road.” There probably aren’t many cultures in the world where “egghead” and “intellectual elite” are such effective put-downs as they are here.

All that notwithstanding, something new and worse has been happening lately to education in America. I will speak of “accelerating disinvestment,” and this disinvestment I argue is both a

SECTION ONE

Signs of Accelerating Incoherence
matter of morale and a matter of money (often in fact beginning as a matter of morale and becoming a matter of money). I speak of this as a sign of incoherence; the disinvestment runs contrary both to what we’ve said traditionally and what we say currently in our common discourse about education. So I begin by attending to education as a place that calls for reflection.

After that, I address the profit motive as it currently establishes itself to be the arbiter in America of all other valuation and enterprise. I suggest that here too we have matter for reflection, arguing that our exclusive focus on profit is incompatible with many things we claim to believe in and care about.

Thirdly, I examine our reliance on force as our guarantee of national security. I suggest our quest for a form of absolute security, sought through intimidation, cannot co-exist with our ambition to become a beacon of light to the human race.

At the end of this section I argue there’s a kind of coherence amid the incoherencies being identified. Just before that though, I turn to Nature, and suggest there’s an ominous contrast between our sense of America as the Promised Land and our actual treatment of the land we inhabit.