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

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We’ve looked at signs of accelerating incoherence with regard to disinvestment in education, with regard to ascendant greed and growing inequality in our accumulation and distribution of wealth, and with regard to our increasing reliance on force to serve an expanding mission. Let’s now turn our attention to our treatment of nature.

As Americans we hold as a generalized truth that humans can’t fundamentally harm nature. The belief must be deeply rooted; it seems more an axiom than a conclusion drawn from observation and experiment. If we position ourselves as a mere observer, we see for instance that a major deforestation has occurred across North America. We see that cod fishing has fallen off along the northeastern United States. Along the northwest, we see that salmon are going the way of cod.

If we look to lumberjacks and fishermen however, we find a curious response. At least until very recently, they’ve been less likely to complain that their fathers and grandfathers have cut down too many trees or caught too many fish than they have been to complain of government regulations that are meant to restrain them from acting as their fathers and grandfathers did.

In the midst of their complaints, they’ve been likely to call themselves “conservatives.” What they’ve wanted to conserve is a lifestyle, and as seems clear, the attitudes that would preserve this lifestyle have deep roots. It’s a lifestyle of freedom—one in which one has generally felt free to engage nature without inhibiting restraints from government. If our lumberjacking activities were making a profit, we were doing God’s work. Let us be
honest here. This lifestyle has tasted good, and these complaining lumberjacks and fishermen are genuinely engaged in trying to continue it and pass it on. So their claim to be conservatives is not unintelligible.

This is so true, that those who wish, instead, to conserve the actual trees and cod and salmon have had to move over and call themselves by a different name. They call themselves “conservationists.” There are few things conservatives are more likely to find pesky and not worth saving than conservationists.

If we consider, say, the case of salmon, we can anticipate how the position of the conservative plays out. As the salmon become fewer, the demand for salmon either remains steady, or quite possibly rises. This means that as salmon become harder to find, and the supply dwindles, the price of each catch increases. As the supply dwindles, so presumably do the suppliers—at least over time. But the incentive for true stalwarts to continue fishing for salmon—if left unharnessed by government regulation and fines—can hold steady or even rise as a function of the increasing scarcity and rising price of salmon. I call them “stalwarts” because the expenditure of labor per salmon increases.

Those who catch the last salmon are likely to find those salmon command a higher price than any salmon ancestors in history. Because of this, the run towards extinction may in fact accelerate as extinction approaches. In the real world of course, the actual end of the industry probably won’t be reached with a “last salmon” but rather at a point when there are so few salmon left, and the trouble of finding them is so considerable, that only demented billionaires will be able to pay for what a continuation of salmon fishing would cost, and they too will pass. (Also, there may be a critical mass necessary for salmon to continue to breed, and when the number of salmon fall below that, they may go extinct. Further, to be sure, the insult of our industrial wastes to the nurturing seas may render the seas no longer fit for salmon.)

What we observe among fishermen and lumberjacks still caught up in this economy—and here we can, for good measure, throw in oil-personnel with regard to petroleum products—is that most aren’t much interested in contemplating some imaginable
extinction point down the road. Rather they focus on the very real trees, fish, and oil still out there waiting to be “harvested.”

If, for all that, one insists on engaging in an argument with these enthusiasts for full utilization of forest, fish, and geology, and insists of pushing this process of depletion in a mental experiment to its predictable conclusion, the conservative fishermen, lumberjacks, and oil producers aren’t bereft of all response. Those among them given to theoretical thinking may respond that once the resources run out, there awaits in nature a malleability and provision for substitution that’s limited only by the imagination and ingenuity of humans. If Africans hunt elephants to extinction for the sake of their ivory, well, that’s no big deal. We will find a substitute for ivory. We will engineer from nature an “ivory” far better than any “raw” ivory nature has provided on its own. If the polar ice caps melt, and take the polar bears and penguins with them, well, we will create in air-conditioned studios animations of bears and penguins more engaging for our children than any bear or penguin behaviors we or our parents ever observed. Likewise, if we deplete our fishing waters of salmon, we will create “salmon meat,” pinked over by the magic of science, every bit as tasty as the antiquated salmon that delighted the palates of ancestors; and because we will control the process from start to finish, this new salmon will be easier to harvest. We can’t lose for winning. And of course, if petroleum products ever really run out, we can always go solar.

As I say, such optimism roots itself in a sense of the indestructibility and infinite plasticity of nature. Our easy taking for granted here betokens our confidence that this mistress we take for granted won’t run out on us. Our complacency about Mother Earth is firmed up in part by our observation of the miracles of

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1. People in petrol-industry in particular try to tamp down any alternative developments of energy while they engage in increasingly desperate captures of petroleum resources; they seem haunted by a fear that access to alternatives, coupled with public concern over climate change, may bring their enterprises to a premature and untimely end. They seem to be genuinely in the grip of a conviction it would be a crime against nature if their industry were tapered toward a shut down before the last accessible petroleum was converted to carbon dioxide.
the industrial revolution. And anyway, aren’t people living longer than ever? Who says Progress is a myth?

Let’s concede this sense is not peculiar to Americans but is to be found today among entrepreneurs all around the world. It’s around the world however partly because we’ve exported it there.

I’m inclined to look back beyond steamships, and skyscrapers, and computers in search of a basis for our easy complacency. As Americans, we may tend to think we’re too practical to owe much to philosophy. I’ve argued however that ideological convictions are often more powerful when we don’t reflect on them. Some claim to find our attitude toward nature rooted in the Bible. In the Bible however (if only we can stop quoting it long enough to read it thoughtfully) we will find notions of human dominance of nature tempered significantly by notions that nature is precious and that we are meant to care for it and learn from it. Francis Bacon, with his ambition as it were to put nature on the rack and tear from her her secrets, seems a closer-to-hand and less ambiguous source for that attitude toward nature we find embedded among us.

In the generation after Bacon came Descartes. If Descartes was not the sole source of “Cartesian dualism” (the dualism of Descartes), he was at least a highly persuasive promulgator of it. Descartes saw us humans as containing souls (genuine instances of an immaterial principle), and was inclined to think everything else on the face of the earth was soulless. We are spirit and therefore immortal, he insisted; but he seemed ready to posit the rest of the world was sheer matter (sheer stuff extended in space and time, lacking any dimension of subjectivity or consciousness). Compensating for such radical emptiness in matter (the en soi that Sartre portrays as nauseating) was its endless pliability. In the footsteps of the Greek originator of atomic theory, Democritus, and in company with Galileo, Descartes affirmed that matter was without color, sound, scent, or taste. These traits, he taught, were mere creatures of our consciousness, products of our way of sensing and thinking.

The world-devaluing scope of Descartes’ conception may take a moment to sink in. Even in the case of animals—your pet dog or cat, the dolphins, the bonobos—Descartes seemed to doubt there was any actual interiority, any capacity for sensation, much less any capacity for affection or decision-making.
In the fifth part of his *Discourse on Method*, he floats the notion that if God designed “automata” (we would say “robots”) having all the operations we observe in a monkey, we humans would not know these monkeys were mere machines. He finds it plausible to think the whole animal world may be a clever array of interacting machines. He could thereby strategically eliminate a “middle case” that would otherwise have blurred his system’s neat dualism; for if a tiger had a “tiger soul,” it would seem it must have a tiger-immortality to match—souls being, in Descartes’ conception, incorruptible; and similar consequences would follow for snails and cockroaches. To populate heaven with the souls of dead tigers, snails, and cockroaches seemed unimaginable. Cartesian tidiness invited the conclusion that tigers feel nothing at all. Why complicate things by positing an “inner tiger” beneath the fur? Why not settle for mere levers, pulleys, and connectors?

John Locke, while criticizing Descartes’ rationalism, accepted Descartes’ dualism with its denatured nature—colorless, soundless, tasteless, and odorless. Locke declared material substance an “ignotum x”—and passed on Descartes’ impoverishing dualism to those who were colonizing America.

If we contrast this approach with the approach of American Indians, and with the approach of almost all our own non-Indian ancestors, we get some sense of how original and radical it is—indeed, how idiosyncratic and surgical. Yet Descartes’ soulless animal seems a comfortable premise for the factory farming whereby we supply our tables with meat today. And Cartesian Dualism may supply a clue when we try to understand the ease with which we slip into spectator mode as we watch so many species approach the threshold of extinction and see others cross the threshold and glide irretrievably into extinction by reason of our habits of encroachment and consumption.

In humble mode people will say: “Humans are too puny to have any real impact on nature.” This is said though the loss and threat of loss of species is empirically evident everywhere. What perhaps enables our indifference to the endangered species list is an underlying sense that the loss of one or another contrived automaton is no big deal. In the magnitude of our humility we believe we can engineer other automata to replace whatever we do in.
Cartesian impoverishment of nature opens the door to a kind of Baconian utilitarianism that situates all things in the service of our need and wants. Nature, it conceives, is neither more nor less than a storehouse of resources for us to dispose of. The value of things other than ourselves is their value to us as consumables. What’s the point, we come to ask ourselves, of elephants? Unless we can eat them, or ride and tame them to our service, or clothe ourselves with their skins, entertain ourselves by watching them, or make figurines from their tusks, they have no point at all.

Still, some may reply: “Why blame us Americans? The world at large thinks this way.” This is true; and it seems increasingly the case. Let’s concede that Cartesianism—and the industrial revolution that hitched its wagon to it—did not begin on American soil. It is however in our interest to discover why a uniquely thoroughgoing, spontaneous, and uncriticized form of optimism about the plasticity and pliability of nature has so captured our hearts and found among us its purest expression. The question opens a realm for speculation comparatively new; one ventures into such relatively unexplored territory at one’s risk.

Puritans and Nature

Fortified with awareness how speculative this is, let me offer three topics toward providing some kind of answer. I begin with the apparent vastness of our continent when our Puritan forefathers first came to settle it. My second topic is the Christian tendency—particularly as Christianity was taken up by Puritans—to observe nature through the lens of sacred scripture. And my third topic, which is something of an outcome of the first and second, is the Puritan tendency, which came to be incorporated into our national consciousness, to see the continent as an unredeemed wilderness.

We begin with the vastness of the American continent. The following speculations seem plausible.

The Puritan sense that the “new world” was, for all practical purposes, inexhaustible must have been compelling. Its message was that God intended through them—the purified Christians—to start the world anew. Cost was no consideration towards achieving God’s aim. Creating things is no trouble for
God. Providence had made provision in “a new world” for a new edition of humankind. In response to this unparalleled opportunity, we see in the early days of New England, a continuing flow of immigration from England. Later, when this flow decreased some, there was the hardy natural increase of God’s people that made necessary a continuing movement into fresh territory. Within the lifetimes of some of the first settlers, New England Puritans had stopped looking eastward—back to cramped and contaminated England—and had focused their eyes on the open west. The “errand in the wilderness” transformed into the manifest destiny of a people.

Inevitably, every move westward involved encroachment on habitat. Tragically for native Americans, this encroachment was Puritan encroachment on their habitat. As noted earlier, it would be a mistake to think such encroachment took place without deliberation. Book was kept; entries were made; in a sense then, the Indian counted. What it may have taken a while for the Indian to figure out is that he or she counted as a Canaanite—one whom the Lord God had created in order to destroy. The loss of an Indian would not be recorded in red ink, but in black. His or her death was a liability canceled. The Indian was being identified with nature as nature was conceived by Cartesians: nature was object, something to be conquered or disciplined or discarded. Indeed Indians’ inability to share this Puritan perspective on nature is what made them “savages.”

In what was regarded as a part of their benighted state, Indians thought of themselves and nature as alive, conscious, and rich in purpose. As for encroachments on other living species: such encroachments were, we can surmise, regarded as incremental and negligible. Theoretically, animals that were not eaten or skinned or domesticated could retreat westward. As for vegetation, it seemed extravagantly supplied. It would have to have been a very eccentric settler who factored in its cost. When, well into the nineteenth century, Thoreau began factoring in the loss of a grove of trees as a deduction from Progress, he was regarded as odd.

This last consideration is telling for the mindset we explore. Puritans weren’t notably prodigal or careless; if anything, they were the opposite. But it would truly have been a rare settler who’d feel compunction or trepidation about uprooting a tree or
plowing over of a field of flowers. Done for the sake of a New Eden, such things were a necessary and trifling cost. The redundancy and generosity of nature impeded a sense of its preciousness. Admittedly, these reflections are speculative. They embody reasonable hunches as to how the vastness of the new world registered on Puritan sensibility.

Secondly, while Catholic theologian and ecologist Thomas Berry does not precisely cite the Bible as a source for devaluation of nature, he has said there’s been a strong tendency among our Christian ancestors to seek their bearings from their reading of the Bible, and then assign to nature the place and character their scriptural interpretations permit. It would be healthier, Berry suggests, to take our bearings from nature and then, guided by these empirical observations, take up the Bible and read it in the context our acquaintance with nature offers. For the Bible, Berry says, draws on what our observations of nature yield. The psalms, for instance, are rich in passages that presuppose we’re alive to the mystery and beauty of our habitat.

The Renaissance was an effort to achieve the break-out Berry describes and advocates. We can see this in the case of Galileo: telescope first, Bible second. Actually, if we look alertly, we can find this in the cases of Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Raphael—and running all through the Italian initiations of what we call the Renaissance. We find there the rebirth of pagan enthusiasm for the human body and the human scene; and this aesthetic shift re-configured the way people looked at the Old and New Testaments.

Beginning in Italy, the Renaissance spread westward and northward. It was sponsored more often than hindered by the popes of the time. When however the Renaissance effort to rebuild St. Peter’s led to the selling of indulgences and the revolt of Martin Luther, the Renaissance in the North took on in fundamental ways the character of a rejection of the Renaissance in the South. In fact a new label had to be minted for it: the Reformation.

The North strongly reaffirmed the primacy of scripture. Re-affirming the primacy of scripture, the rebirth or Re-formation in the North found many un-scriptural elements to complain about both in the contemporary Catholic South and in the Catholic past. There was the strong monocratic doctrinal and political
power of the Roman pope. There were all those sacraments. There was the High Mass from the Middle Ages—with a metaphysical doctrine of “transubstantiation”—along with incense, Gregorian Chant, mammoth cathedrals, and stained-glass windows. And the return of a pagan Greek celebration of the human body was one more troublesome encumbrance marring the shining face of scripture—one more impurity. The North was sure one did not look to nature for the right way to read scripture; one righteously read scripture for a way to hold nature in check.

Even among so many protestors, Puritan Protestants dissenting from the Anglican Church distinguished themselves as a people who would have nothing to do with “Roman” accretions and dilutions of Christian faith. Because these Puritans have been a parental influence on every subsequent generation of Americans, one can ask whether, in rejecting so much that brings aesthetic sensibility into play, they didn’t successfully put their children’s and their children’s descendants’ capacity for appreciation of nature under constraints that tended to sap its vigor.

Our third topic regarding Puritan aesthetic sensibility continues the first and the second. We consider the Puritan reaction to wilderness. Wilderness was a place of wildness, a place of unpredictability. As New Englander Robert Frost says in later times to his neighbor: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” For the Puritan, this “something” had to be addressed, dealt with, brought to heel. The wild and the free was the devil’s playground.

Here however we must be especially tentative. Puritans were capable of spontaneous response to natural beauty. Rich in written culture, and profoundly introspective, some demonstrated warm emotional engagement with this world. Anne Bradstreet, who lived from 1612 to 1672 (belonging therefore to the first generation of American Puritans) could write a letter to her husband in the form of a poem, and could begin by addressing him:

My head, my heart, mine eyes, my life—nay more,
My joy, my magazine of earthly store…

There’s conjugal compatibility celebrated here; but surely there’s tribute to conjugal sexuality as well. This is but a sample of much in her poetry showing a lively sense of the good things present here and now; and her poetry tells us something not just about herself but about her community, for it seems her poetry was well regarded by fellow Puritans.

In the next century, there’s Jonathan Edwards. In a notebook of personal jottings, Edwards reflects on natural beauty:

> The works of God are but a kind of voice or language of God to instruct intelligent beings in things pertaining to Himself…. The immense magnificence of the visible world in inconceivable vastness, the incomprehensible height of the heavens, etc., is but a type of the infinite magnificence, height and glory of God’s work in the spiritual world.³

The first sentiment can be paralleled in the notes, life, and work of Michelangelo. The second is something one could say anticipates the message of Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* (the favorite one).

Here’s more from Edwards:

> It is very probable that the wonderful suitableness of green for the grass and plants, the blue of the skie, the white of the clouds, the colours of flowers, consists in a complicated proportion that these colours make with one another…. The gentle motions of waves, of the lily, etc., [seemed designed to be agreeable] to other things that represent calmness, gentleness and benevolence, etc.; the fields and woods seem to rejoice, and how joyful the birds seem in it…. Those beauties, how lovely is the green of the face of the earth in all manner of colours, in flowers, the colour of the skies, and lovely tinctures of the morning and evening.⁴

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Here is a much richer sense of nature than the sterile sense of the world projected in Cartesian dualism. And this continues in Edwards. One might think one was reading John Muir. (Edwards belonged to the tradition out of which Muir came; Edwards was an American-born Scotch-Presbyterian-Puritan. His differences with other Puritans over church structure shouldn’t disqualify him as a representative of Puritanism. The breakout toward exuberant sense experience in Edwards becomes full blown in Muir.)

What remains noteworthy though is that these Puritan tributes to nature come from the same pen that wrote the sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” In this sermon we’re not concerned with journal jottings. This was a sermon Edwards put out there for the world at large to ponder. Here we’re told that the very charms and god-revealing beauty of nature may lure the unsuspecting Christian into false complacency. When all things are going well, such a Christian may say to himself or herself that eternal damnation is an unlikely prospect, and this for Edwards places that soul in jeopardy.

In his sermon Edwards goes to great lengths to shatter one’s workaday trust, and make the case that the natural world in which we live and move is a thin crust over the flames of hell. How close are the excruciatingly painful fires of hell, and how eternally they will burn! Speaking of those who have succumbed to human emotion and begun to live trustingly in the world, Edwards preaches:

The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation does not slumber; the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them; the flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over them, and the pit hath opened its mouth under them.5

The sermon, powerfully written, has provided an example for evangelical preaching ever since. Its relevance to our inquiry is that it argues we’d be making a dangerous mistake were we simply to surrender ourselves to the harmony and beauty of things

as they now present themselves. We must regard earthly beauty with what Puritans have elsewhere called “weaned affections.” Howsoever nature may still deck herself in innocent beauty left over from Eden before the Fall, she stands now—due to the sin of humankind—in need of redemption. An acute Augustinian sense, further refined by Calvinism, had come to qualify, and all but erase, that passage we find in Genesis: “And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good.”

Augustine, writing The City of God, depicted the present world—perhaps with deliberate rhetoric and hyperbole—as “the city of Satan.” What Augustine may have intended for dramatic contrast was literal truth for Puritans: this world is Satan’s domain. Between Augustine and the Puritans had come Calvin. With his doctrines regarding the fewness of the elect and the predestined damnation of most humans, Calvin had limned in dark shadows a version of Christianity which became gospel truth for Puritans. Those shadows are brought to the foreground in the writings of Hawthorne, a deliberate anti-Puritan; they shade and color each page of The Scarlet Letter. Similar shadows linger in misgivings that haunt the meditations of Melville. One can find these shadows still in the much later homey poems of Robert Frost.

The beauty of nature became provisional—a hypothetical beauty. The only world that could be trusted was a redeemed world, and it would obviously be premature in the Puritan understanding of things to say the wilderness that confronted them was such a world. Rather the world as it presented itself to the Puritan was the domain of the trickster; it was Satan’s domain, and one put oneself in jeopardy who trusted in its beauty.

Only through completion of the God-given mission we have now mentioned at length could that wilderness be redeemed. Until then, if one was to regard nature’s beauty, it must be with “weaned affections.” Dedication to the mission armored one. An encounter with nature could be safe only for one held tight by the discipline of our godly mission.

Rejection by Puritans of the Renaissance in its Italian and Catholic forms of celebration of human nature was a good predictor of how Puritans would regard American Indians. When Puritans were pushing the notion that they had come into a vacuum domicilium, an unoccupied territory, they would often remember
(how could they forget?) that Indians did after all live here. That’s when it was convenient to call the Indian a “savage,” suggesting thereby he was a part of unredeemed nature; the implication of the term was that the Indian was altogether too much at home in his body and in nature, a condition certifying him as satanic.

The issue then of Puritan aesthetics is richly complicated—complicated by its rejection of “Catholic paganism,” and by resistance to the beauty and dignity of nature. Moreover the Italian Renaissance itself was a truncated project. In rejecting it—in rejecting the celebration of human beauty so evident in Renaissance painting and sculpture (and really in its literature and architecture as well)—the Puritans rejected what was an imperfect recovery by Italian Renaissance Catholics of that love of nature we find in classical Greece. From the perspective of ecologists today, the Catholics of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries didn’t go far enough. While reclaiming the Greek sense of human beauty, these Renaissance Catholics fell short of a general reopening of their eyes to nature. The Council of Trent and other features of the Catholic Counter-Reformation acted as agents to cool such paganizing tendencies toward nature among European Catholics.

If we look to the Greeks of pagan times, we see their celebration of the human form was just one part. They celebrated ocean and sky, sun, earth, and time itself. The forms they sculpted, and the stories—often erotic—they told of gods and goddesses, provide intimations of sublime and awesome powers rippling everywhere. Even at the beginning, leaders of the Catholic Renaissance may have held back from a fear of idolatry were they too confidently to follow the Greeks in such a direction. (We know for instance that both Botticelli and Michelangelo, stirred by warnings from Savonarola, feared at times their preoccupation with beauty was putting their souls in jeopardy.) Also, perhaps even in Italy, it could be that with the emergence of the Scientific Revolution and Cartesian thinking, these freshly “re-born” Catholics came to regard celebration of nature as a step backward. The bleak landscapes that backdrop some of Leonardo’s most graceful paintings of saintly humans are enigmatic; they provoke curiosity, and are perhaps instructive anticipations of Cartesian thinking. Perhaps Leonardo was registering a sense that humans are the one bright spot in an otherwise desolate world.
Be that as it may, Puritans in general seem to have guarded themselves from even the threshold of any spontaneous veneration for nature. When Arthur Miller writes *The Crucible*, he has the Salem witch trials originate from news that young girls were dancing scantily clad or naked in the forest. Whether this was really the beginning of that multilayered episode, is probably impossible to say. What makes it at least plausible is that two elements, both of which were regarded with Puritan suspicion, come together: the human body and the wilderness. To a Puritan imagination, conjunction of these two may have been proof enough that Satan was alive and well and about to take over Salem.

In general, American Indians, like the pagan Greeks, seem to have taken joy both in their bodies and in the natural surroundings that nurtured them in body and spirit. While nature had fearful aspects for them as well as for Puritans, Indian cunning and spiritual technology were usually deemed adequate to placate and supplicate malignant spirits. Nature seems for the majority of tribes to have been a “familiar” — a dazzling ever-present counterpart to life. But that's too weak. Nature was the wellspring of life and resting place of ancestors, the source of being and a matter of constant interest — a richness far more to be met with gratitude than suspicion. Had Frost been writing of Indians, he’d have done well to have them say: “Before the land was ours, we were the land’s.”

We can hypothesize that in rejecting and killing Indians, Puritans did immense damage to their own souls. In the course of their long project of violence to wrest the land from Indians, one can imagine cases in which large numbers of them throttled what vestiges of aesthetic sensibility Calvin had left them. That some became murderous toward their own at Salem, as many had been murderous toward Indians, is not surprising. Freud might find in such violence something like a “return of the repressed” — the karma-like price one pays for despising what is natural. As Descartes had devalued nature, so Puritans despised those who recognized themselves as nature’s children.

If ever anyone thought “an idle mind is the Devil’s workshop,” Puritans did. It seems, “an idle mind” came to mean for them a mind that was at rest contemplating. One can speculate that this attitude became a widespread source of American
anti-intellectualism. Contemplation was especially dangerous, they thought, when this idle mind was reveling in natural beauty. To sanitize and purify one’s attention to nature, it was important that it be dealt out only under the constraints of duty. Pleasure in nature was legitimate only when it served the Mission.

Max Weber writes:

The idea of a man’s duty to his possessions, to which he subordinates himself as an obedient steward, or even as an acquisitive machine, bears with chilling weight on his life. The greater his possessions the heavier—if the ascetic attitude toward life stands the test—the feeling of responsibility for them, for holding them undiminished for the glory of God and increasing them by restless effort. The origin of this type of life also extends in certain roots...back into the Middle Ages. But it was in the ethic of ascetic Protestantism that it first found a consistent ethical foundation.⁶

Weber goes on to say this ethic “acted powerfully against the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions,” but then immediately he adds:

On the other hand, it had the psychological effect of freeing the acquisition of goods from the inhibitions of traditionalist ethics. It broke the bonds of [restraint on] the impulse of acquisition in that it not only legalized it, but (in the sense discussed) looked upon it as directly willed by God.⁷

And so the Puritan Mission, begun as “an errand into the Wilderness” (phrase cited by Perry Miller from a Puritan pastor), transformed itself into—became in time the informing spirit of—the Monroe Doctrine, Manifest Destiny, the Open Door, and (to bring things into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) the War to Make the World Safe for Democracy—i.e.,

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make the globe safe for American-style economic activity everywhere. In the course of the transformation, “the wilderness” became the whole world, and the Mission became a permanent crusade—whose latest instantiation can be seen in our seeming war-without-end on terrorism.

This at least is Weber’s and my schematized version of how the pursuit of happiness came to be replaced among us by a compulsive effort to acquire goods and stabilize the process that makes their acquisition and secure retention possible. It’s a version that predicts what we actually experience: the commercialization of almost all aspects of our life—so that it seems no sooner does a person climb a high mountain or win a golf tournament than that person turns himself or herself into a brand—a marketable commodity. Our aesthetic sensibility pays a price.

We find it difficult to put our finger on the connections here. They are so familiar as to be invisible. To be sure, the Puritan doctrine of election is hardly held by anyone today. The terrible irrationality and denial of human equality in saying that God arbitrarily elects some to blessedness and others—the majority—to damnation became at some point indigestible. Yet the doctrine of divine election didn’t actually disappear. It went through a transformation. It persists in a religious, social, political, and economic doctrine of our exceptionalism. We Americans continue to think of ourselves as a great exception, endowed with unique prerogatives.

We regard some nations as more equal than others, and ourselves at the summit; Calvinist arbitrariness and its assumption of an inequality that splits the human species apart at its depths still run the show. A willingness to trump the ordinary usages of law by providing special privileges and opportunities for the American way—and by providing privileges for some Americans over other Americans—is in plain view. We who follow the American way act as an elect people still. We may say we do so from a sense of noblesse oblige, but often our actual program is neither noble nor governed by a sense of obligation to others.

Elect though we be, we’ve gradually been drawn, kicking and screaming—and resisting even now—toward an awareness that we’re supposed to be equal within the confines of our own nation—are supposed to treat fellow citizens as equals. When a Martin Luther King reminds us of this, we do give some attention
to what he says. Regardless though of whether we achieve that equality at home, we see ourselves as an elect people in relation to the world’s population at large. When, in the last year of his life, King presumed to deny we have this special status and demanded that we treat people in every corner of the world as equals, we ignored him; and we still ignore him. We’ve set aside a special day for ignoring him annually called Martin Luther King Day.

When we sing “God bless America” there’s reason to fear we’re not so much asking God’s blessing as asserting we’ve already got a special entitlement to it. When we sing Irving Berlin’s song at our national sport, it’s often a person in military uniform who performs it. The occasion moves us, I fear, by reminding us we are a holy nation. So much so, that when we invade a country to punish its leadership for keeping from us something we want, we praise ourselves as willing to die for the American way; we’re thinking of our soldiers and ourselves as protecting America by maintaining for it the special privileges God intended us to have.

Regarding the tenor of our daily lives, a moral reconfiguration has gradually taken place. What began as a quest for “the good that can fulfill the heart’s desire” has been diluted into a mere quest for goods. Black Friday heaped on Black Friday. We’re so busy increasing our acquisitions, we’ve little time to reflect upon the preciousness of what we already have. The Thanksgiving meal is encroached upon by the quest for yet more stuff. Consequences for the maintenance of habitat are considerable.

The key, as suggested by Weber, to understanding this lies in grasping that our desperate search for justification has required palpable signs of sanctification—has required Success in three-dimensional form if we are to achieve the sought-for reassurance. And this reassurance is never sufficient. An ironic consequence is that we descendants of Puritans find ourselves indistinguishable from secularists and atheists. We can find in the atheist Ayn Rand a spokesperson for our agenda.

To review: The desire to know if one was “saved” was irresistible. It seemed one could perhaps know one was among the elect if God confirmed one’s lifestyle with the blessings of success. When Puritans gave up (once the non-Puritan Stuarts had regained the English throne) on reforming the Church of England, the Puritan Mission came to be geographically redirected; the Mission turned from east to west. An errand to establish
Eden in New England as a temporary sanctuary re-emerged as a long term project to “win” the West. Manifest prosperity, achieved under Christian auspices, would be the token of victory; and the individual’s saving participation in that victory would be marked by acquisition of personal wealth.

This version of our development (embroidering on themes of Weber, Perry Miller, and William Appleman Williams) allows otherwise puzzling things to come into focus. The resolute opposition to taxes of people who label themselves Christian seems easier to understand in the light of such a version. Taxes are compulsory sharing. But such sharing tends to dim the radiance of triumph—the full physical prominence—that should distinguish those who’ve most successfully served the Mission. Governmental intrusion has, in effect, the character of stealing luster from the specially blest. Such intrusion has a taint of sacrilege. If the poor are to be relieved—and Jesus says they are—let them be relieved not by grey and godless acts of government, but by those generous personal gestures, those thousand points of light and acts of individual kindness, that will reflect back upon the giver, and beyond him or her, enhance God’s glory. This sense of how the righteous are to be known among us has relevance for our care of nature and good order; for a fairly predictable corollary of the contraction of government’s role is that the preservation of habitat and civic infrastructure should be more a matter of private dedication and donation than a matter administered by law. Conspicuous giving goes some way toward certifying publicly the membership of the rich at the apex of the elect. Unfortunately, and to the loss of all of us, this certification becomes more important than actually taking care of things.

The analysis being drawn here from Weber seems confirmed also by light it sheds on the Spanish-American War—and the many wars, mostly undeclared, which have followed. That, with the exception of a disenchanted Mark Twain or a skeptical Will James or a metamorphized Andrew Carnegie, practically no one with an important voice could find an alternative to the Spanish-American War and its aftermath is instructive. It accords neatly with the notion we’d become by then a people in thrall to a machine-like ethos of acquisition—no longer appreciating or taking care of the things nature had plentifully provided. Misgivings Twain had expressed in The Gilded Age
in the 1870s—where he and co-author Charles Dudley Warner chronicle an accelerating decay of humans amid an increasingly mindless worship of Progress—were strongly confirmed in Twain’s lifetime. It’s instructive that the inhumanity he had sensed at the center of things in the 1870s was so manifest in the slaughter of defenseless Philippine Moros thirty years later as to render this most articulate of Americans almost speechless with anger.

When the Spanish-American War was over, McKinley lived long enough before assassination to say it had been a mistake. Late in his own presidency, Theodore Roosevelt publicly acknowledged regret for the acquisition of the Philippines—the part of the war in which he’d had the most influence. Even John Hay, who’d called the war “a splendid little war,” didn’t seem to find much in its aftermath to lift his spirits. He worked harder than ever once the war was officially ended (among other things, penning those notes about China); but before the “pacification” of Filipinos was complete, he died abruptly, still in harness as secretary of state, in 1905—done in apparently by his exhaustive service to the expanding Republic.

These earnest men seem the incarnation of Max Weber’s “obedient servants” who bear “a chilling weight”—the greater their possessions, the heavier and more life-draining their sense of responsibility for securing and enlarging them. Roosevelt correctly predicted that the acquisition of the Philippines would eventually lead to a “catastrophic” war with Japan. It was beyond him however to apologize for the war he envisioned. Further, the contemporary deaths of thousands of Filipinos—while regarded as “necessary” to the exercise of the American Mission—left these earnest men, not bathed in some glow of victory but numbed with a sense of perplexity and futility. (This is much like what later leaders and the foot-soldiers under their command would find in Vietnam and in Iraq, and what we’ve now come to experience in Afghanistan, and are beginning to experience in Syria.)

Further, this version of our past supplies a context to understand how it is that even as the Gulf of Mexico was serving up a murky brew of oil and dead waterfowl and contaminated fish, a preoccupation of many of us (even among those living along the oil-drenched shoreline of the Gulf), and of our media pundits,
and apparently of our president was that we not let ourselves get discouraged or carried away by the disaster, but that we resolutely and heroically continue our deep-ocean drilling for oil. American optimism demanded we do no less.

The revision of The American Story presented here makes it easier to understand our preoccupations. If our utilization of natural resources is not a means to some other end, but is itself an end to which we’re willing to subordinate just about everything else, then a lot of things fall into place. BP makes sense. Wal-Mart makes sense. Monsanto makes sense. This unqualified and uncritical willingness to “move ahead” lends force to the hypothesis that it’s rooted in an inherited sense of mission—a conviction this is what we were born to do. We seem to have lost all instinct for appreciating and nurturing the harmonies of nature, the beautiful synergies by which the natural order protects itself. Currently, as it were to corroborate this notion, we’re “fracking” oil shale deep in the bowels of the earth while seeming to turn a blind eye to evidence that we’re triggering earthquakes and leeching toxic substances into drinking water in ways not good for children or other forms of life. Here too our attitude seems counterintuitive enough to make one suspect that spontaneous responses are being overridden by an inherited program—as if the very cells of our brain have been reconfigured to accept dictates from a kind of ideological template.

This view of how aesthetic sensibility has been suppressed in us helps also toward explaining the almost inexplicable conduct of financiers who so game our economic system that they seem likely finally to destroy its credit and render it inoperable. If the accrual of monetary profit is the measure of Success, then each increment of money is an increase of points, promoting one to a higher score. And there’s no such thing as having too high a score; it’s a contradiction in terms. One therefore reaches toward as high a score as possible. One will do this even if “winning the game” by such means, results in ending the game one has won. The behavior is irrational only if the money game is, as Aristotle insists should be the case, a mere means to something else. The risk in the go-for-broke behavior is that Aristotle is right. If he is, then playing the game out to its point of failure does not seem a good idea after all. The connection with aesthetic sensibility is
that it is only if we have suppressed aesthetic sensibility that we can absolutize the pursuit of money in the way we have.\footnote{Some will respond that the complete collapse of the money game is unimaginable, and therefore not worth worrying about. The premise of their response seems to be: “What can’t be imagined, can’t happen.” The premise does not seem sound.}

That it seems so unnatural to us even to talk of the danger of “too high a score” confirms we’re engaged in compulsive behavior. Aesthetically blind, our natural instincts smothered, we seem committed to a mission that imposes on us the kind of ultimate claim that only God could place on our ancestors. This is the evidence that we are a puritanized people. We seem, in fact, to be engaged in a modified version of no other than their mission—secularized perhaps, but holding us in the iron and unyielding throes of obsession with precisely that blindness which is obsession’s touchstone.

Returning from there back to the bearing that blindness seems to have on national education, here too this “Weberian” version of our history may shed light. There is, I postulate, a longstanding tradition of American anti-intellectualism, one about which Hofstadter wrote insightfully throughout his career (albeit with troubling inconsistency in his treatment of Puritanism), and about which Susan Jacoby and Naomi Klein have written more recently. This anti-intellectualism can be seen as a predictable requirement if we are to hold ourselves to, and be constrained by, the American Mission. As John Winthrop seemed to realize, criticism must be suspended if the mission is to proceed.

Education, of its nature, fosters critical thinking; it cannot occur without it. As Hegel pointed out, one can’t really think critically about things without engaging in dialectic. I mentioned already, if I say, “John’s a good man,” you can’t really weigh my statement—that is, process it critically—unless you’re willing to conduct a thought experiment in which you ask yourself: “How would things look on the supposition John is not a good man?” You must then ask how well that imagined world fits the world that actually confronts you. In other words, a thesis about a good John must be checked out by examining a hypothetical antithesis.
about how the world would look with a non-good John. (John may of course come through this process just fine. When you think about a world with a non-good John you may conclude it is nothing like the world you actually know.)

But to do this sort of thing with the proposition “America is the greatest nation on earth” is to enter into temptation. To check out this proposition by entertaining its opposite is to flirt with heresy. Its to give aid and comfort to our enemies (currently an imprisonable offense). Keepers of the national conscience (George Will or Charles Krauthammer, Karl Rove or Barack Obama) will call “foul” if you do such a thing. Education however moves, as we can see in the example of Socrates (with Hegel concurring), towards just such testing of value judgments. While our politicians praise education, few personally chance the burdens and jeopardy a critical thinker can expect in our American context. Not daring to venture into critical thinking themselves, is it any wonder our leaders prove less-than-reliable providers and guardians of the education of others?

We find a critical thinker an embarrassment to the American project. When, say, a Noam Chomsky comes along, many among us are quick to dismiss him out of hand as a man who “hates his own country.” We do this lest we get drawn into an enterprise of reflection and criticism that’s both unfamiliar and dangerous—an enterprise often viewed, in fact, as “un-American.” One who believes as I do that “an uncritised past is prelude to repetition” can trace our rejective response to critical thinkers back to the paradigm provided by the Puritan exiling of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, and to the Puritan execution of Quakers. It should be no surprise that one who suppresses his affinity for nature suppresses too his affinity for humans.

Particularly, then, the critical version of our history set forth here provides a context for understanding the Christian right.

The Christian right insists it’s Christian. Yet it is deeply committed to money-making; it’s opposed to taxes; it’s in favor of most wars our politicians propose; it prefers a well-established and aggressive foreign policy to one that’s accommodating; it seems to regard most efforts at critical thinking as trouble-making; it opposes Darwinian views that would see man as a part of nature; and with regard to nature itself, it seems generally complacent and careless, dismissing most scientific concern for
the protection of species and habitat as elitist—that is, as ill-founded, un-American, and motivated by hidden agendas.

Little of this, at face value, seems even remotely to echo Jesus as he’s presented in the gospels. Jesus looks to the lilies of the field and to the sparrows as emblems of God’s love. He sees God’s love mirrored in the care of a father for a wayward son and a shepherd for a lost sheep. He says it will be difficult for a rich man to enter heaven (and not because the rich man has stolen, but because the rich man is rich). He calls on those able to share to do so—to be protectors of the young, and to provide relief to the sick, and to the widow, the orphan, and the outcast. Jesus is presented as the Prince of Peace, and warns against living by the sword; he is shown demonstrating forgiveness. In his dealings with others, he aggressively transgresses boundaries of ethnicity, gender, and status, going out of his way to repudiate and violate well established games of segregation and subordination. He does not exemplify nor advocate an uncritical acceptance of authorities (even those who quote scripture), but speaks of truth as that which can set his disciples free. His parables encourage conscientious care for God’s gifts, including a care for one’s personal talents. By his actions he manifests himself as one who thinks and acts independently. He was crucified for resolute political incorrectness.

If we ask where in history we find something that corresponds to the behavior of the American Christian right of today, there seem severe obstacles to finding a counterpart in Jesus as portrayed in the gospels. If however, rather than look to Jesus, we look to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a notable correspondence to the Christian right can be located in the Puritans of that time. They too interpreted acquisition of money as a signal of God’s favor. They too resented taxes and regarded those who collected them as generally unauthorized. They believed in aggressive warfare against neighboring “savages,” and celebrated their victories over these neighbors (even such “victories” as were simple massacres) as acts manifesting God’s glory. Believing those who dissented from their doctrines should be exiled or executed, they believed that much of what counted for secular learning in their day was godless and should be denied or neglected or excluded. As for nature, they regarded it as a wilderness—a realm in which Satan had a free hand, a place to be regarded with
“weaned affections”—above all, a place needing to be mastered, tamed, put into harness.

Pundits have written how political strategists, particularly in the Reagan/Bush era (1981–2016, and counting), “shrewdly brought the Christian right into politics.” What the pundits seem to overlook is the steady Puritan presence all along. Puritan ideology has been the controlling ideology of our politics from the start. What the Christian right represent is the branch of the tradition that’s modified but not abandoned the explicit theological moorings of the original Puritans. This is in contrast to those in the secularized off-shoot. Let Jefferson represent these. His defense of profit-making by way of breeding “slaves”—people he delusionally thought he owned—was largely unbehinden to theological reflection.

In summing up, it is hard to get a firm grasp on what’s going on today. Let me suggest there are three phases to consider. First there is the devaluation of nature that’s achieved within a Cartesian context and that’s carried forward with Puritan vigor. Nature has no interiority. Too indifferent and busy to study it, we eviscerate it. We deny to it internal form and dignity. We see it as altogether subject to our designs. We see it purely as plastic object.

Then there’s our identification of “enemies” (whatever human or non-human we find blocking our path) with that “plastic nature” which we’ve devalued. These enemies too become mere grist for our mill, no more than fresh opportunities for the exercise of our freedom. These enemies can be “savages,” or African-Americans, or Mexicans, or Filipino Moros, or “gooks,” or contemporary Muslims. They can be deer that threaten our suburban foliage.

Thirdly, a final phase of this devastating perspective is a move toward its more perfect realization within the boundaries of the United States. As we’ve seen lately, the logic of our foreign policies is being increasingly applied among ourselves. The dismissive ways which we used to reserve for “foreigners” (alien parts of an alien world) are now coming home to roost. Those with economic and political power incline increasingly to treat the rest of us as mere empty matter also, awaiting more total integration into their designs. They are increasingly successful. Their control can be benign (*Brave New World*) or menacing (*1984*)—or a mix of both. The contrast developing so starkly today between them
and the rest of us is no embarrassment to them; it’s a contrast by which they achieve a desperately sought validation. Without it, these elect would not know who they are.

Stepping outside the perspective of the demented rich, a couple aspects of what’s going on are daunting. (1) The natural world is neither inert nor inviolable. As its free and conscious offspring, we can so violate the conditions by which it has managed to bring us forth that we turn it into a place that can no longer support us. We are moving with quickening pace toward achieving this. The rich and powerful, who—very much with our complicity—increasingly control our behavior, have insight neither into the compulsions that drive them nor the very real constraints of nature under which they operate. At a quickening pace, they treat “nature” as an externality—something of no proper concern to them except as a business opportunity. (2) The second daunting aspect is that even when the rich and powerful would prefer to maintain their elect status through benign rather than menacing forms of control, they lack insight into what others need. With loss of aesthetic sensibility have gone wisdom and the ability to empathize. As the rich prove increasingly inept at benign control, they’re likely sooner or later (from the start, in the case of minorities) to resort to efforts at control by intimidation—employing tools well honed and tested beyond our borders. For decades the CIA has spied on people of other countries and subverted their attempts at self-determination; now, increasingly, the NSA is spying on Americans, and our government is persecuting and seeking to prosecute those who have revealed this. While this second daunting aspect may be the first to focus our full attention, it’s the first aspect—the inability to see ourselves as part of nature—that portends the more drastic and irreparable harm.