

Getting at the root of feelings of disenfranchisement:  
The social virtue of honesty in US-UK mutual development

Dominic Burbidge  
*University of Oxford*  
2016

In my research I consider social virtues, and would like to take the opportunity to look at current American and British feelings of disenfranchisement in terms of the social virtue of honesty, which I believe defines and establishes the Anglo-Saxon world. This is not to say that the Anglo-Saxon world is more honest, just that it is more fixated on honesty as a way of measuring morality and trustworthiness.<sup>1</sup> Honesty is thus a coordinating virtue, integral to public debate, just as other societies may have as their coordinating virtues notions of charity, industriousness or bravery.

It is easy to see how concepts of honesty, integrity and individual conscience pervade Anglo-Saxon social discourse, to the extent that notions of 'honesty' and 'trustworthiness' are inextricably bound—basically meaning the same thing in common parlance. To be trustworthy is to be a 'man of one's word'; it is to 'walk the talk' so that 'what you say is what you do'. The strength of this connection in the Anglo-Saxon world dates from the Protestant Reformation, which saw—among other things—a raising of the status of individual interpretation of scripture to a level of equality with institutional interpretations coming from positions of authority. It is generally seen as more important, therefore, to hold to your personal convictions than obey arbitrary authority, a sentiment that forms the core of American republican thought, as well as the history of the establishment of the British parliament as sovereign in relation to its, now constitutional, monarchy. The UK parliament is a demarcated *place* for freedom of speech over and above normal citizen rights to free speech, because

---

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, when attempting a literature review on economic studies of honesty, Christian Bjørnskov simply chooses to describe literature on what he considers 'the parallel concept of trust'. Bjørnskov, C., 'On the determinants of honesty perceptions in the United States'. *Rationality and Society*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2012), pp. 257-294, p. 259.

nothing that is said in the House of Commons can be liable for defamation.<sup>2</sup> (Basically, the House of Commons is a place of freedom to insult.) In American films, the love of personal conviction against authority is captured well in the seemingly omnipresent phenomenon among American Hollywood soldiers of being told that they are not allowed to go back to save their fellow wounded marines because it is too dangerous, but then getting together and deciding they are going to break these rules and save their friends anyway.

Institutional success depends, in this moral psychology, on sufficient demarcation of *places* for freedom of thought, criticism and independent evaluation. An institutional setup that lacks sufficient space for independent thought is believed sterile and on the decline, regardless of the numbers of people that seem to be behind it. Isolation of Britain by Napoleon through the Continental Blockade reinforced, rather than reversed, British sentiments on the value of independence, and found expression in 19<sup>th</sup> century English romantic paintings of isolated, self-sufficient village life, as well as the current perceived value of a parliament independent of European Union control, even if that means having to face a second Napoleonic trade blockade.

What makes Anglo-Saxon appeal to the self-sufficiency of individual conscience *functional*? Does it not simply amount to anarchism, a willingness to break with rules, law and institutional solidarity?

The main thesis of my paper is that there used to be something that helped bind together American and British societies which is now struggling to stay alive. It is not simply a case of whether populism is for-or-against rules. The question is whether there is sufficient social understanding of the places that have been—however informally—designed for a crossover of public and private honesty. Social understanding of these places is broken, at present.

The French Revolution appealed to universal liberty. Instead, Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville preferred to decipher national biographies when pointing out British and American

---

<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the write-up in the Hansard of what is said in the House of Commons provides the most favourable construction, helping hide grammatical or speech errors and ensuring appropriate salutations.

commitments to freedom. These two alternative types of historiographies—continental versus Anglo-Saxon—are not incompatible; it is more that they come at the question of human rights from opposite directions. In France, rights are universal, and therefore French republicanism seeks to shake off the arbitrary shackles that have arrested an otherwise natural truth. For Anglo-Saxons, accessing universal notions of freedom and human rights as pre-social is a valid option but bordering on the simplistic. Rather, the ideal of freedom is best discovered in the journey of national histories. Hence the narration of a gradually evolving British constitution, which seems to have a journey about as unnecessarily complicated as Frodo through Middle Earth; or the fixation of American dads on books that demonstrate the unique precariousness of America's founding. For American republicanism, we are the people that *have been able* to shake off arbitrary dictatorship, and so we are well-placed to help others around the world *in their similar journeys*.

When discussing notions of individual conscience earlier, I mentioned the special case of the British House of Commons, which has even weightier protections for freedom of speech than society as a whole. In this way, parliament is a *place* for freedom, rather than merely a *space* for freedom. That distinction is thoroughly unFrench and unKantian, in that it endorses a certain inequality of position between those who are inside and outside the place. The invisible line becomes apparent when observing UKIP leader Nigel Farage's interventions in the European Parliament. In responding to the maiden speech of the President of the European Council Herman van Rompuy, Farage said the President had the 'charisma of a damp rag and the appearance of a low grade bank clerk'.<sup>3</sup> When asked to apologise, Farage announced that the only apology he would make would be to bank clerks, who were unfortunately insulted by association with van Rompuy. Perhaps more interestingly, Farage defended his position with a notion of parliamentary privilege, stating that 'we have different definitions of what freedom of speech is. My interpretation of free speech is that the limits upon it are that you cannot

---

<sup>3</sup> Waterfield, B., 'Nigel Farage fined after Herman Van Rompuy slur'. *The Telegraph* (2 Mar 2010). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/eu/7352572/Nigel-Farage-fined-after-Herman-Van-Rompuy-slur.html> (accessed 28/06/16).

incite violence, but that it is perfectly fair to criticise other people and especially to do so in a parliament.<sup>4</sup>

The tradition of *special places* for free speech, rather than *universalisms* of free speech is an almost entirely forgotten strategy for forming the public sphere. Benedict Anderson and Jürgen Habermas have encouraged us to look, rather, at speech in the public sphere in terms of media of expression transformed through technological innovation.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, for Habermas, formation of the public sphere involved, over the course of European history, an ever-expanding exposure of aristocratic life. Though interesting, these are ways of studying where speech has been produced and made effective, a slightly different question to where the place of speech has been consciously designated by a democratic political community.

For talk of what speech is right, we commonly invoke the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 19) and the European Convention of Human Rights (art. 10), both of which appeal to universalisms. Without seeking to contradict their value, we have to understand that the Anglo-Saxon approach was not built through categorical imperatives but through the father-son relationship of designating particular places for the transfer of personal integrity to public duty.

Reflecting on the power and attraction of the Stasi, and the difficulty of standing for independent beliefs that are able to challenge the system as a whole, at the close of his book *The File* English writer Timothy Garton Ash states: 'I save the file called Romeo on my computer [the documents the Stasi held on him] and close the door. I go to my sons.'<sup>6</sup> The feeling here is, perhaps, that there is something unfathomably sinister and yet attractive about a state regime ordered towards full information, and that a last defence can only be made in the

---

<sup>4</sup> UKIP MEPs, 'Nigel Farage will apologise... to bank clerks the world over' (2 Mar 2010). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyoxr8GrHyY> (accessed 28/06/16). Farage was eventually fined 3,000 euros. Waterfield, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, B., *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006); Habermas, J., *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Garton Ash, T., *The File: A Personal History* (London: Atlantic, 2009).

cultivation of those who one is personally responsible for, and with whom one has no need to hide anything.

If one looks through American and British family portraits of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, one will usually find adolescent boys standing in the same pose as their fathers, often wearing the same outfit. One's profession, and one's family links into that profession, would set the tone for institutional ethics, demarcating the *place* where personal integrity finds expression in public duty. Nowhere was this more the case than in the profession of banking, which fostered throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries a classical liberalism of thriftiness in saving money and stoicism against the fluctuations of the market, passed from father to son as if a heavy duty. This set the banker outside the business cycle by instead being generational, which in part explains the difficulty Franklin D. Roosevelt faced in convincing the American elite to tackle the Great Depression through expansionary fiscal stimuli at a time of public debt.

These traditions of integrity were dealt three blows from which it has failed to recover, and which I believe lie at the root of current popular feelings of disenfranchisement and mistrust in America and Britain. The first was the cost of duty in the two World Wars, both in terms of deaths and in terms of the loss of a sense of life's purpose among those who returned. The second was the fusion of Marxist and feminist thought in second wave feminism. Marxism considers elite professions as purposefully exclusionary and protective of minority interests against change. When post-war feminists resented calls to withdraw from the working world, the feminist movement found increased utility in adopting the Marxist critique that these professions were purposefully structured to exclude so as to perpetuate inequalities. The argument assumes there to be finite elite positions in society, which is an assumption diametrically opposite to the father's message to his son: that this work needs to be done by someone *and you are the only one I have near to hand*.

The third blow came as part of the development of professional psychology in America which, together with an individualisation of religious experience,<sup>7</sup> coalesced around the conclusion that the best person to judge what is good for you is yourself. I have never heard of anything

---

<sup>7</sup> James, W., *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902).

so stupid. It has necessitated a restructuring of American and British economies to be consumption-led, rather than investment-led, which means we can only grow when people feel like it, rather than when there are good global opportunities. It frames saving money as bad for your health, and makes a virtue of regular financial self-insufficiency, which we call your credit rating.<sup>8</sup>

These three assaults are, ultimately, assaults on the places where private honesty used to meet public duty in the Anglo-Saxon world. As research reviewing survey evidence in the United States has identified, 'weaker perceptions of honesty among ordinary people lead to losses of confidence in politicians. After all, politicians may not be that different from "ordinary" people.'<sup>9</sup> We no longer have places for the crossover of private integrity and public duty, just as we no longer give space in politics anymore for small networks and personal loyalties.<sup>10</sup> For the formation of a citizenry, therefore, we are at a loss as to how to make leadership meaningful. The only possible route is to re-designate a place for a democratic political community.

---

<sup>8</sup> As such, one of the hardest challenges in the Western World at present is, I believe, overreliance among central banks on the view that lowering interest rates acts as a monetary stimulus on the economy to increase inflation. Our economies are so thoroughly consumption-based that *the interest rate has become the price* for many low-income consumers of houses and cars, and so the monetary stimulus of lowering interest rates has a countervailing effect of making prices lower, damaging the attempt to increase inflation.

<sup>9</sup> Bjørnskov, 2012, p. 280.

<sup>10</sup> Philp, M., 'Access, accountability and authority: Corruption and the democratic process'. *Crime, Law & Social Change*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (2001), pp. 357-377.