



Installation in a store window in Milan.

The Occupy Wall Street movement may ultimately peter out; or it might grow, even globally, earning a real voice and seat at policy making tables demanding concrete reforms; or it might become totally irrational or inexcusably violent, sowing the seeds of its own demise. In the meantime, however, it is not to be ignored because it has the potential of sparking a genuine debate – an age-old debate touching on the nature of government and markets, political and economic systems, the purpose of life, private enterprise, the definition of success and prosperity, ethics and virtue, and much more. Such genuine debate can only happen and have real impact in a democracy.

Western civilization produced democracy. It also produced capitalism. Without one the other can hard-

ly exist. Other political and economic systems have had their moments, even long moments. But it is only democracy and capitalism that are yearned for by the common man the world over and which have been fought for, died for, and adopted by nation after nation, people after people. Why? Because it is through democracy and capitalism that the individual is freest, most dignified, and most fulfilled.

The world is on an inexorable march towards global democracy and capitalism, driven by an innate desire to be free and to express one's individualism. In Asia, in Africa, in the Middle East, traditionally dominated by villages, tribes, and other communal identities, there is now an unprecedented convergence of politics and economics towards the individual, accelerated by technology which allows the individual to become the center of a connected world. Yet, while individualism (and the self-responsibility and self-reliance that must go along with it) is at the heart of democracy and capitalism, it must be remembered that democracy and capitalism evolved in a context of commonly shared values. Individualism is *not* ego-centricism and can survive in the long run only when it is manifest in a system of shared ethical values that views man not only in material ways but also immaterial ways; i.e., both body and spirit. To flourish, our founding fathers teach us, democratic and capitalistic actors must reject materialistic individualism in favor of a more noble conception of life and society that fosters duty to a higher authority and to one's neighbor. It is precisely – and *only* – this profound conception of liberty deriving from a higher, natural law that makes it morally worthy of giving one's life for its defense as generations of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines have done. If we do not hold this to be true, then all of our founding documents, all of our wars, all of our freedoms, all of our international frameworks like NATO, the United Nations, the World Bank, mean nothing.

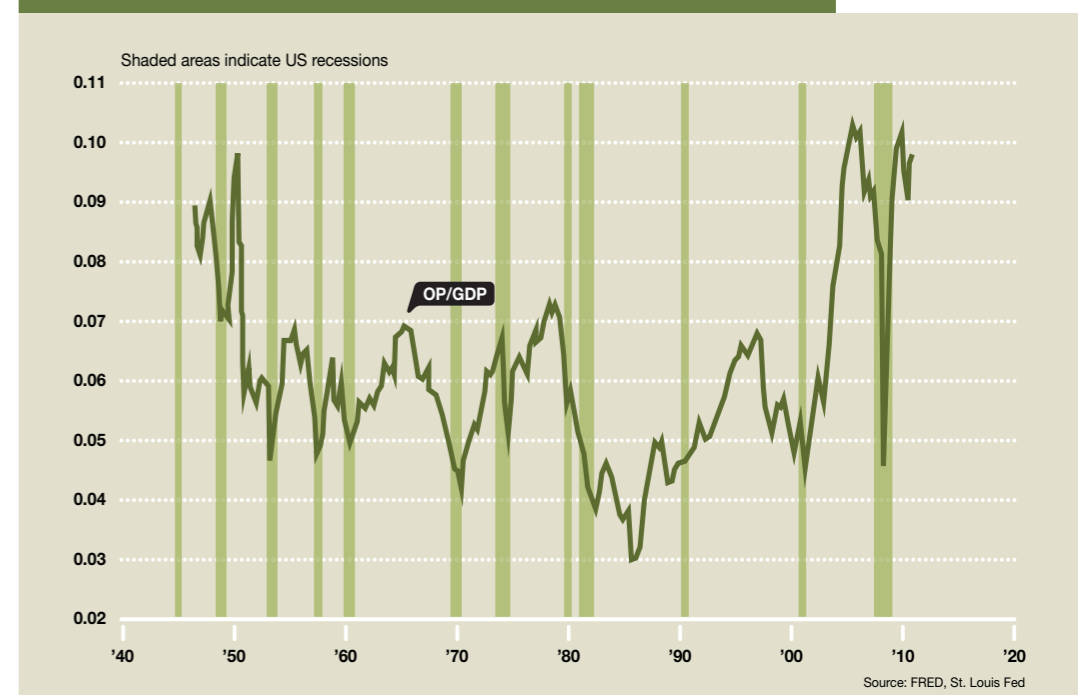
American diplomat and philosopher Michael Novak, who represented the United States at the UN Commission on Human Rights during the Reagan Administration, argued that the typical American citizen did not aspire to be “a rugged individual, isolated and alone. To be independent, yes, and also self-reliant. Yet also to be an active member of many communities, to be open to appeals from the needy, to be informed about the world at large, and to care about its problems.” American democratic capitalism cultivated a unique spirit that freed the individual from the stifling village traditionalism of the past, while encouraging free attachment to “intermediate associations” that would keep the individual from slipping into loneliness and isolation, greed and despair. Associations would cultivate good habits of self-control and other civic virtues essential to counter the corrosive potential of freedom, and would ironically give ordinary citizens the oppor-

tunity to develop their God-given human potential.

Virtue must be re-injected into our vocabulary precisely because the market is *not* morally neutral as commonly (conveniently?) believed. The market does not exist without market participants, who are either morally good or morally bad. And since human nature tends toward the bad, the bad will win unless human nature be re-oriented and habituated toward the good through the exercise of virtue. Speculating is bad behavior unless one has the resources himself to make up for the potential loss. Bailouts are bad behavior because the burden falls on all, not on those who have mismanaged. Frivolous lawsuits, especially against doctors, are bad behavior because they raise health care costs for all, including the most vulnerable and sick. Lending for the sake of lending is bad behavior because it is imprudent; but not lending for the sake of hording is also bad because it lacks courage and halts growth. Prudence, courage, fortitude, honesty, and restraint must be exercised by the individual, by the corporation, by the community, by the government. Greed, lust, envy, or gluttony must all be checked. Even the most passionate free marketeer, Milton Friedman, suggests that business should be conducted to make as much money as possible but while conforming to basic rules of society embodied in ethical custom.

Cultivating virtue is not the work of government – it is the work of families, schools, churches, synagogues, mosques, communities, businesses, and corporations – all associations in which the individual constantly lives and with whose other members the individual constantly interacts. The survival of the fittest must be redefined as the survival of the fittest body *and the fittest mind* and the fittest soul. It is virtue in politics and virtue in business that must be publicly rewarded with praise and financial gain. We must speak about charity in business. We must encourage the obligations to pay debts or to help the poor. Ethical norms must be re-engaged in public discourse because of their very roots in human nature. We must return to the moral nature of *homo economicus* and *homo politicus*. We must return to ethics in the classroom, ethics in the board room, ethics in the banking system, ethics in the town square, and ethics in our own personal lives.

CORPORATE PROFITS AS PERCENT OF THE ECONOMY



Ironically, friction in the marketplace, or the transaction cost, decreases the more actors are morally sound and predictable.

The world is richer and more prosperous now than ever before. Education, technology, and the opportunity for advancement are more available than at any other time in history. In order for this not to be jeopardized, ethics must return to public discourse, and it must be framed in the universality of man's duty to the Almighty, country, and neighbor. We must return to the universal Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” When economic and political actors grow up in a culture of virtue, with a sense of obligation to serve the greater good rather than just themselves, shareholders, and the bottom line, the market itself becomes a force for civility, peace, and prosperity. Perhaps the unintended consequence of the rabble-rousing, disorganized, generally materialistic and pointless crowd known as Occupy Wall Street will be to make us re-examine our collective conscience.

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