



■ Book Review ■

Unjust—Social Justice and the Unmaking of America

Noah Rothman. Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2019, 256 pages

Yuk-kuen Annie Cheung
York University, Canada

Unjust—Social Justice and the Unmaking of America by Noah Rothman offers a penetrating political critique of the social justice movement in the United States.

“Meeting jaw to jaw is better than war,” Winston Churchill.

As with many of us around the world, Rothman’s main tenet rests firmly in favour of “jaw” while condemning the resorting to violence in public discourse and political protests in the United States.

During my undergraduate days, I became aware of the view that left-leaning commentators are often the shrewdest critics of capitalism, and that the reverse is true for right-leaning pundits on socialism and communism.

Today, when increasing numbers of people share a very critical attitude towards the unfettered dominance of private capital and elitist privilege disguised as property rights, demarcations between “left” and “right” seem no longer premised solely on economic institutions and market fundamentals. The focus of contention has shifted markedly towards a glaring inequity in wealth distribution and what this book calls “social justice” issues.

Rothman’s book provides a view of American identity politics that, I believe, is largely shared in the tent of the Republican Party today. His view is that political activism has now returned the quest for social

justice into a zero-sum game. Not only will this development divide the country into aggrieved victim classes and warring racial tribes, but in his opinion it demotes the traditional notion of social justice from the purity of blind justice and equal treatment for all, to becoming an instrument for retribution and real racism, thereby institutionalizing discrimination.

Rothman utilizes historic references to delineate some of the origins of social discourse, attributing much of the undercurrents of discontent in the United States today to identity politics: identitarianism, the labeling and formation of victim classes, which naturally turns into seeking redress (or in the author's word, revenge.)

Around the world, we are hearing a loud and growing voice calling for justice over a wide range of social issues (e.g., discrimination over race, gender, LGBTQ, civil rights, pay equity, climate change and habitat survival). The social movement of protests today proves the point that there is a valid and credible public discontent and a genuine anxiety about the human condition, both local and global. But whether a cause is to be considered a real claim or simply verbal gymnastics depends on interpretation. One might expect national interest to be used as the touchstone. And, broadly speaking, in a liberal democracy both the nature of the nation as well as global norms offer guidance.

However, in these Orwellian times, clarion calls can be confusing to us, the listeners. We are witnessing every day the bending of truths, re-writing of history, grand-standing, mob emotions, and the "feel the feelings" culture writ-large that saturate both the traditional and the social media.

In the conduct of government, an enduring liberal democracy depends on giving citizens full voice, as well as transparent and accountable institutions. Unfortunately we hear more often than not "fight speech," rather than reasoning. We now need to fact-check everything, and don't debate complex ideas adequately. Moreover, the shifting of norms away from trustworthiness and credibility by public figures is undermining confidence in democracy.

The book was written and published just before the release of the *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, also known as the Mueller Report. In his book Rothman opines that whatever jeopardy we might be confronted with, as described in the Report, would come to pass with the inevitability of history. He blames the conducting of social discourse on extremist factions in both parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, and believes party discipline should play a useful role in restoring calm and confidence.

To Rothman, Lady Justice's moral stance would be impaired by yielding to identitarian pledges. The integrity of Lady Justice requires her to wear the blindfold. As an integral part of the system of governance, the justice system should remain as a means for delivering fairness; while fairness is an overall assessment, it cannot be judged by the outcome of each individual case. Accordingly, to apply identitarian political pressure to the Judiciary forces the system to impart special accommodation, to be partial to one group. Systemically, this would be just the opposite of traditional social justice.

Indeed public policies, even well meaning ones, can have unintended negative consequences that carry a specific disenfranchising effect. Under Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal which sought to bring relief at the time of the depression, The Homeowners Refinancing Act was enacted and its Home Owner's Loan Corporation saved millions of people from foreclosures. But in its role of allocating rescue funds, the HOLC deemed black neighbourhoods as high risk investment, drew a boundary around the neighbourhoods, and refused granting assistance. The domino effect which ensued was one of a spiraling downward in desirability of the homes for purchase and upgrading. Rothman explains that this is one of the origins of ghettos in many American Cities and, the author claims that this is the result of a socialist program intended to bring people out of poverty.

Certainly I would argue that should the administrator have ascribed more weight to those who were most vulnerable, and most hard hit by

the depression as the prime group favoured for the approval of funding, and matched this with ancillary measures in the spirit of the social contract of the New Deal, the outcome today might have been quite different. In public policy assessments, the question often asked is: what might have happened absent intervention?

Nobel Prize Winner Joseph Stiglitz called the American dream, a myth, but one should surely be forgiven for believing this myth is an ideal worth pursuing. Rothman believes lofty ideals encompassed in the US Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Federalist Papers form a framework to guide and inspire the country on this journey. According to Rothman, adherence has seen 240 years of progress towards equality, and the nature and tempo of change is the essence of the dream as it has been prescribed.

Rothman suggests that the kind of social justice championed by interest-focused social groups which demand special accommodation will, in effect, divert society away from the pursuit of merit and excellence. The author continues that asserting social justice demands is identity politics in practice and this type of development will “transform civil libertarian movements to illiberal movements.”

The 241 pages of Rothman’s text cut a wide swath through the American social political experience and there is no shortage of provocative ideas, some novel and brilliant, some I would hesitate to agree with but that is because there is always more than just one interpretation to each event. In my hesitation, I revisited every concluding segment in every chapter of the book, and soon I realized I was reading the words of a sincere and well-meaning writer. There may be differences in political ideas, but an opening to furthering a dialogue is always a good thing.

Finally, may I borrow these words from Adam Gopnik’s new book, *A Thousand Small Sanities*;

For liberals use the word *liberty* the way the word love is used by songwriters—it’s what the song leads to but not all the song

can be [...] Tony Bennett said once that you should always pay special attention when Frank Sinatra sings the word *love*. But that's because *love* is not the only word he sings.

I still have several nagging doubts: Can the political leadership of Rothman's leading nation be so afraid of the tyranny of the majority? How are governments keeping pace with rapid changes in society, including with respect to demography, and how may that affect universal values? Does the government have a duty to provide a wide safety net to catch and to protect its most vulnerable groups? As with Tony Bennett's observation about Sinatra's singing, what I take away from Rothman's book is the need to unpack the uses of "social justice".

Outcomes for people are the most important consideration, including with respect to equitable access to resources and opportunity, in accordance with the social fabric of each society.

Biographical Note

Yuk-kuen Annie Cheung (Ph.D., RPP), Research Associate of the York Centre for Asian Research at York University in Toronto, is a professional urban and regional planner. She has published extensively on principles and practices of sustainable development and has broad experience in non-governmental organizations both in an executive capacity and serving on boards. Dr. Cheung has recent exposure to the issue of human rights performance in NGOs, and her current research focus is on the human dimension of sustainable development. E-mail: yacheung@gmail.com
