Opinion



South Redondo neighborhood, South Redondo Beach, California (Unsplash/Paul Hanaoka)



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Wednesday I began my look at Matthew Stewart's important essay in the June issue of Atlantic Monthly, "The Birth of a New Aristocracy" (online as "The 9.9 Percent Is the New American Aristocracy"). It is easily the most important and challenging essay published this year and, after briefly examining some of the additional key points, I would like to suggest ways it is uniquely challenging to U.S. Catholics.

The section on "The Invisible Hand of Government" is priceless. It not only exposes the fallacies that we hear repeatedly from Republicans and conservatives of all stripes about who pays the most taxes, it raises a related issue, how the 9.9 percent avoid paying their fair share of taxes in the first place:

> Our false protests about paying all the taxes, however, sound like songs of innocence compared with our mastery of the art of having the taxes returned to us. The income-tax system that so offended my grandfather has had the unintended effect of creating a highly discreet category of government expenditures. They're called "tax breaks," but it's better to think of them as handouts that spare the government the inconvenience of collecting the money in the first place. In theory, tax expenditures can be used to support any number of worthy social purposes, and a few of them, such as the earned income-tax credit, do actually go to those with a lower income. But more commonly, because their value is usually a function of the amount of money individuals have in the first place, and those individuals' marginal tax rates, the benefits flow uphill.

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The numbers that follow are staggering:

> Every year, the federal government doles out tax expenditures through deductions for retirement savings (worth $137 billion in 2013); employer-sponsored health plans ($250 billion); mortgage-interest payments ($70 billion); and, sweetest of all, income from watching the value of your home, stock portfolio, and private-equity partnerships grow ($161 billion)," Stewart writes. "In total, federal tax expenditures exceeded $900 billion in 2013. That's more than the cost of Medicare, more than the cost of Medicaid, more than the cost of all other federal safety-net programs put together. And — such is the beauty of the system — 51 percent of those handouts went to the top quintile of earners, and 39 percent to the top decile.

How any Catholic can think this corresponds to the common good, which is the end of government the church sanctions, is beyond me.

Stewart's treatment of the relationship between real estate pricing and social segregation is a must-read. If you think liberals are enlightened paragons of moral virtue, especially when it comes to issues of social justice, try and pass zoning regulations in an enclave like Brookline, Massachusetts or Berkeley, California, that would bring in more low-income housing? The social segregation reifies the aristocratic constitution of the culture, through local control of schools and school funding. "Given the social and cultural capital that flows through wealthy neighborhoods, is it any wonder that we can defend our turf in the zoning wars?" Stewart asks.:

> We have lots of ways to make that sound public-spirited. It's all about saving the local environment, preserving the historic character of the neighborhood, and avoiding overcrowding. In reality, it's about hoarding power and opportunity inside the walls of our own castles. This is what aristocracies do.

The section on "Our Blind Spot" brilliantly exposes the myths that the 9.9 percent tell ourselves to justify or ignore our privilege, as the situation demands. It is important and bracing reading.

But it is a line in the eighth section on "The Politics of Resentment" that leapt off the page: "The political theology of the meritocracy has no room for resentment." What

Stewart is describing is a theology, for us Christians an idolatrous theology to be sure, but a theology nonetheless. It relies on transcendent claims about what cannot be seen to erect moral norms that are deemed universally applicable. The ethical results are often perverse: In polite company today, a woman can explain how glad she was to have had that abortion without fear of social stigma, but if she asks where she can go to enjoy a cigarette, she is a pariah.

One way to measure the success of the aristocratic theology is the degree of resentment it produces. "We're positively acing that test," he wryly observes.

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Stewart does not make the mistake one frequently finds in both the intellectually lazy and, strangely, among some of the targets of resentment:

> No one is born resentful. As mass phenomena, racism, xenophobia, anti-intellectualism, narcissism, irrationalism, and all other variants of resentment are as expensive to produce as they are deadly to democratic politics. Only long hours of television programming, intelligently manipulated social-media feeds, and expensively sustained information bubbles can actualize the unhappy dispositions of humanity to the point where they may be fruitfully manipulated for political gain. Racism in particular is not just a legacy of the past, as many Americans would like to believe; it also must be constantly reinvented for the present. Mass incarceration, fearmongering, and segregation are not just the results of prejudice, but also the means of reproducing it.

During the siege of Sarajevo, how often did we hear about the "ancient hatreds of the Balkans" and that FDR was right to not let Churchill drag the U.S. into the geopolitics of those countries? But Sarajevo was the only city in Europe with an ethnic intermarriage rate comparable to the U.S. before the siege. The hatreds that had existed in the past were brought back and put to evil ends by specific men with specific goals. Similarly, when progressives complain that the problem is racism or patriarchal culture or xenophobia, they fall prey to the temptation of the broad brush, the sweeping explanation, and unwittingly overlook that actual people perpetuate these social sins as much as these social sins can themselves take root in such a way that a person commits them even if she does not want to.



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Stewart warns that gross inequality usually ends badly for everybody, with violence and war. He proposes a rededication to the ideal of equality. I fear that the 9.9 percent are already seeking to hijack that venerable ideal, extending equality's demands to their gay friends and that "nice black couple," the lawyers, down the street, but never questioning why their housing choices are subsidized by the government while funding for low-income housing is cut, or complaining about the cost of college and the prospect of college debt while ignoring the financial prospects of those who do not go to college. Think back to the 2016 debates in the Democratic primary and all the time spent on making college affordable and the complete lack of discussion about what happens to the kids who do not go to college.

If you belong to the 9.9 percent, or spend a lot of time with them, you know that they truly are blind to their own privilege. They really do think that the resentments of the bottom 90 percent are rooted in ignorance or malice, not justified grievance or righteous indignation. The 9.9 percent may go to the church on Sundays, or they may not, but as a class, they worship themselves and their lifestyles. The crosses in their lives, as a class, are the tiniest of crosses. It is good to belong to the 9.9 percent. Until the pitchforks get sharpened.

Catholic social doctrine does not favor revolution. It favors human dignity and the common good. It champions human rights and pairs them with responsibilities, both the right and the responsibility tied to values beyond the value of human choice. It demands sacrifice from those with much to assist those who have too little. It prioritizes cooperation over competition, sharing over consuming, respect for Mother Earth above profit. In short, the view of the world that Catholic social doctrine puts forward is not the worldview of America's 9.9 percent. But it may be the only thing standing between them and the pitchforks, if only they would take the time to learn.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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