

Suffer into Truth

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Zeus has led us on to know,
the Helmsman lays it down as law
that we must suffer, suffer into truth.

(*Agamemnon* by Aeschylus)

Ancient Greece gave us the gifts of drama, democracy, philosophy, history, and the rule of law. Today's Greece offers up disturbing questions concerning Globalization. Can the citizens of the world through civil discourse tame the fury of a rapacious laissez faire global capitalism that has detached itself from the check of popular government? Or are we caught in a global spiral of political dysfunction, class warfare, and economic polarization leading to increased instability, riot, revolution, and an end to the concept of "civilization" Greece started for the West over two millennia ago? Are the TED Talkers merely Cassandras whose warnings are incapable of belief until too late? Where are the Athenas whose wisdom can persuade us into corrective, collective action?

To a large extent it was the ill effect of laissez faire capitalism that offered the peoples of the world a choice among Communism, Fascism, and Democracy in the years between the World Wars of the 20th Century. Democracy and Communism allied to defeat Fascism in WWII. Then using republican democracy to liberally limit *laissez* to make capitalism more fair and by harnessing its dynamism for creating wealth, capitalism's benefits were spread enough to create a large, vibrant, and industrious middle class while allowing for a social safety net. This tense and fragile Mean between democracy and capitalism was the "Democratic Capitalism" from the 1940s into the 1980s that then brought down the Berlin Wall and defeated Communism.

Thereafter the equilibrium destabilized. Capitalism exploited the markets it had helped to free. Democracy attempted to export its brand of government to peoples it still hoped to free. Capitalism found it could succeed globally under any type of government so long as it embraced by treaty or otherwise the rule of common law contract. Democracy was less successful: too many types of governments found substantive rights inimical to the rule of their law.

Economists and political scientists do not really debate how the equilibrium destabilized into the global economic meltdown that now has democracies paralyzed, new global plutocrats increasingly dictatorial, and politicians, citizens, and capitalists running from accountability. Many economists now wish they could

theorize a way back to what suddenly seems a prelapsarian age of Democratic Capitalism before riot and revolution overthrow both and Chaos descends.

Greece is now playing out a pressure-filled semi-tragedy in which the balance between civilization and chaos seems very real. It has played this tragedy before, once on stage in Athens in 458 BC when the playwright Aeschylus presented his tragic trilogy of plays known as the *Oresteia*. In the words of Robert Fagles, “The *Oresteia* is our rite of passage from savagery to civilization [and] dramatizes our growth from primitive ritual to civilized institution.” Its action descends generationally through a prehistoric society in which “might makes right,” in which the Olympian gods ordain bloody revenge: a king must kill his daughter so the Greeks can sail to Troy to avenge the abduction of his sister-in-law; a queen must murder her husband to avenge their daughter’s death; their son Orestes orders of Apollo must then avenge his father’s death. Orestes, the hero of the *Oresteia*, brings the gods into conflict when he kills his mother. Though his revenge is justifiable under Olympian law, Orestes realizes he cannot escape the moral guilt of matricide as represented by the Furies, primordial goddesses of retribution who drive the conscience-stricken Orestes towards suicide. It seems the primitive cycle of death and destruction will continue as the Furies’ law demands Orestes avenge his mother’s loss of life by taking his own. Pursued by the destructive passion of the Furies, Orestes’ guilt trip takes him to Delphi where a sympathetic Apollo can absolve him of blood guilt but not his guilty conscience. Apollo sends Orestes to the Goddess of Wisdom, Athena, and a mythical inflection point between tribalism and civilization is reached when Orestes arrives in historical Athens.

Enter Athena, who delegates to Man the work of making sense of the chaotic justice of the gods. She establishes the first criminal court and presides over the first murder trial, empanelling a jury of citizen-mortals who will henceforth collectively be deemed the objective, reasonable person. In the deliberative process Athena establishes, Man will hear and decide on the evidence presented by the prosecuting Furies and Apollo, counsel for the defendant Orestes. When instructing the jury, the goddess no longer dictates to Man but, rather, urges that destructive passion be balanced with reason and compassion, both personally and politically:

Neither anarchy nor tyranny, my people.
Worship the Mean, I urge,
shove it up with reverence and never
banish terror from the gates, not outright.

(*The Eumenides* by Aeschylus)

When “Reasonable Man” deadlocks, Athena casts the deciding vote and Orestes is acquitted. For Man’s usurpation of their justice, however, the Furies vow to continue their destructiveness until Athena persuades them that their fearful passion is needed as a companion with reason and compassion to make the new justice system work. They are persuaded by Athena that Man will then revere them and both will be benefitted by a system in which destructive passion is held in check by and balanced with reason.

Implicit in the *Oresteia*’s harmonious ending is the necessity of an informed and engaged citizenry actively participating in a new form of government, Democracy, which Aeschylus viewed as “The Mean” and which emerged in Athens during his lifetime after a century of struggle for rights, work, and property against an often tyrannical and oppressive oligarchy. Though the *Oresteia* implicitly celebrates Athens’ experiment with Democracy, which like our Democratic Capitalism of the 1940s and ’50s was born out of world war, it was an unsustainable brand of pure, direct democracy that was rejected by our Founding Fathers. Former landed oligarchic families were essentially cut out of the Athenian process as its direct governance fell prey to the sway of demagogues, the whim of ostracism, and the tyranny of the majority. Its

economy became too dependent on its allies' payment of protection money which funded its imperialist adventures and massive building projects. As its treasury dried up, Athens underwent liquidity crises and fell prey to its enemies. Various stabs at democracy seesawed with oligarchy until Athens was forcefully absorbed into Philip's Macedonian Empire.

It is no wonder that Aristotle, who was employed by Philip to tutor his son, the future Alexander the Great, found Democracy so imperfect in his *Politics*. His experience was the failed Athenian Democracy that lacked balance, the Mean he so extolled in his *Ethics*. It is also no wonder that our propertied Founding Fathers, studying Greek and Roman history, fashioned a system of checks and balances hoping to find a successful equilibrium between oligarchy and democracy. We seemed to have rediscovered it during and after WWII.

It was the Democratic Capitalism that won the Cold War for which the peoples of the world yearned and for which poor and oppressed Asians, Africans, and Arabs now pray and fight, a capitalism that was balanced with the equities of democracy. Global Capitalism in its current iteration is politically rootless and socially ruthless. What must we—citizens, politicians, and bankers of the world—do to “suffer into truth” *together*?