Pragmatic Exhaustion

by Henry Oliner

I sense an exhaustion with all things political.

Too much to absorb, analyze and understand. In the hail of information, data and events we resort more to our previous beliefs to make sense of it, and in this process become more hostile to anything that challenges our understanding.

Perhaps this feeds the hyperbole and the demonization. When arguments resort to broad generalities criticisms are hard to refute, yet when every detail, error, and misstep is focused on without context we miss the forest for the trees.

We think we are rational creatures. Madison Avenue knows us better. Our first responses are emotional. Advertisers know that you have only a moment to capture the minds of your prospects, and you rarely have the time to collect the evidence to reach rational conclusions. You must connect emotionally or you will lose them.

Once you have made that emotional connection you will rationalize your choice. You will recognize all the facts and data that support your choice and discard or discount anything that contradicts or questions your decision. I call this emotional rationalism.

It is an interesting aspect of the English language that two similar sounding words can have opposite meanings. Rational and rationalization is an example. Science and scientism is another.

To be rational is to use reason and logic to reach conclusions. To rationalize is to get the sequence backward, start with a conclusion and select the facts that support it.

Similarly, science is a process to reach a conclusion using

provable evidence, objectivity, and constant testing and skepticism. Scientism is using science to reach nonscientific conclusions.

An awareness of things political has become an obsession. For the left, most things require a political solution, usually systemic, involving an institution like a bureaucracy which acquires its own dynamics. For the right, most problems are solved in the market, by innovative individuals. Political solutions are treated with skepticism.

The progressive continuum occupies a space in the middle of the larger continuum between individuals and the state. That is where the political controversy plays.

We criticize the ideological, but perhaps the pragmatic is what exhausts us. We need principles and ideology balanced with pragmatism. In the absence of a map or a model we get pulled in endless directions and feel constantly lost. We need both; a map and a real sense of where we are.

Tips to Paul Hart for the edit.