

Inquiring Minds Topic- March 19, 2021

Bob Barger, Moderator

America is Having a Moral Convulsion by David Brooks in The Atlantic, October 5, 2020. (The following are excerpts from the original article that was 25 pages long)

Discussion questions

- 1. How can we regain social trust?**
- 2. Truth decay- How can we take back truth or is the new code- “whatever works best for you” is truth?**
- 3. How can we regain trust in our Federal Government?**
- 4. How do we begin to fix the disparity between rich and poor?**
- 5. What part has social media played in our current situation?**
- 6. What social services/programs should be controlled/legislated at the federal vs state level?**
- 7. How should we navigate individual self -interest versus societal interests (ie Covid masks and state shut-downs)?**

AMERICAN HISTORY is driven by periodic moments of moral convulsion. The late Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington noticed that these convulsions seem to hit the United States every 60 years or so: the last was the social-protest movements of the 1960s and early '70s. In 1981, Huntington predicted that the next moral convulsion would hit America around the second or third decade of the 21st century—that is, right about now. And, of course, he was correct. Our moment of moral convulsion began somewhere around the mid-2010s, with the rise of a range of outsider groups: the white nationalists; the young socialists who upended the neoliberal consensus; activist students on campus; the Black Lives Matter movement, which rose to prominence after the killings of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice. The earthquake had begun. The events of 2020—the coronavirus pandemic; the killing of George Floyd; militias, social-media mobs, and urban unrest—were like hurricanes that

hit in the middle of that earthquake. They did not cause the moral convulsion, but they accelerated every trend. They flooded the ravines that had opened up in American society and exposed every flaw.

This essay is an account of the convulsion that brought us to this fateful moment. Its central focus is **social trust**. **Social trust is a measure of the moral quality of a society—of whether the people and institutions in it are trustworthy, whether they keep their promises and work for the common good**. When people in a church lose faith or trust in God, the church collapses. When people in a society lose faith or trust in their institutions and in each other, the nation collapses.

For his 2001 book, *Moral Freedom*, the political scientist Alan Wolfe interviewed a wide array of Americans. The moral culture he described was no longer based on mainline Protestantism, as it had been for generations. Instead, Americans were living in a state of what he called **moral freedom: the belief that life is best when each individual finds his or her own morality—inevitable in a society that insists on individual freedom**. When you look back on it from the vantage of 2020, moral freedom, like the other dominant values of the time, contained within it a core assumption: If everybody does their own thing, then everything will work out for everybody. If everybody pursues their own economic self-interest, then the economy will thrive for all. If everybody chooses their own family style, then children will prosper. If each individual chooses his or her own moral code, then people will still feel solidarity with one another and be decent to one another. This was an ideology of maximum freedom and minimum sacrifice.

During most of the 20th century, through depression and wars, Americans expressed high faith in their institutions. **In 1964**, for example, [77 percent of Americans said they trusted the federal government](#) to do the right thing most or all of the time. Then came the last two moral convulsions. **By 1994**, only **one in five Americans said they trusted government** to do the right thing. In 1997, [64 percent of Americans had a great or good deal of trust in the political competence of their fellow citizens](#); today only a third of Americans feel that way.

In America, interpersonal trust is in catastrophic decline. **In 2014**, according to the General Social Survey conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, **only 30.3 percent of Americans agreed that “most people can be trusted,”** the lowest number the survey has recorded since it started asking the question in 1972. Today, a majority of Americans say they don’t trust other people when they first meet them. Unsurprisingly, the groups with the lowest social trust in America are among the most marginalized. Trust, like much else, is unequally distributed across American society, and the inequality is getting worse. Each of these marginalized groups has seen an additional and catastrophic decline in trust over the past few years.

Black Americans have been one of the most ill-treated groups in American history; their distrust is earned distrust. In 2018, 37.3 percent of white Americans felt that most people can be trusted, according to the General Social Survey, but only 15.3 percent of Black Americans felt the same. This is not general misanthropy. Black Americans have high trust in other Black Americans; it’s the wider society they don’t trust, for good and obvious reasons. And Black perceptions of America’s fairness have tumbled further in the age of disappointment. In 2002, 43 percent of Black Americans were very or somewhat satisfied with the way Black people are treated in the U.S. By 2018, only 18 percent felt that way, according to Gallup.

The second disenfranchised low-trust group includes the lower-middle class and the working poor. According to Tim Dixon, an economist and the co-author of a 2018 study that examined polarization in America, this group makes up about 40 percent of the country. “They are driven by the insecurity of their place in society and in the economy,” he says.

In 2012, 40 percent of Baby Boomers believed that most people can be trusted, as did 31 percent of members of Generation X. In contrast, only 19 percent of Millennials said most people can be trusted. Seventy-three percent of adults under 30 believe that “most of the time, people just look out for themselves,” according to a Pew survey from 2018. Seventy-one percent of those young adults say that most people “would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance.” Many young people look out at a world they believe is screwed up and untrustworthy in fundamental ways. A mere 10 percent of Gen Zers trust politicians to do the right thing. Millennials are twice as likely as their grandparents to say that families should be able to opt out of vaccines. Only 35 percent of young people, versus 67 percent of old people, believe that Americans respect the rights of people who are not like them. Fewer than a third of Millennials say America is the greatest country in the world, compared to 64 percent of members of the Silent Generation.

But the true insecurity is financial, emotional, identity and social

First, financial insecurity: By the time the Baby Boomers hit a median age of 35, their generation owned 21 percent of the nation’s wealth. As of last year, Millennials—who will hit an average age of 35 in three years—owned just 3.2 percent of the nation’s wealth.

Next, emotional insecurity: Americans today experience more instability than at any period in recent memory—fewer children growing up in married two-parent households, more single-parent households, more depression, and higher suicide rates.

Then, identity insecurity. People today live in what the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman called *liquid modernity*. All the traits that were once assigned to you by your community, you must now determine on your own: your identity, your morality, your gender, your vocation, your purpose, and the place of your belonging. Self-creation becomes a major anxiety-inducing act of young adulthood.

Finally, social insecurity. In the age of social media our “sociometers”—the antennae we use to measure how other people are seeing us—are up and on high alert all the time. Am I liked? Am I affirmed? Why do I feel invisible? We see ourselves in how we think others see us. Their snarkiness turns into my self-doubt, their criticism into my shame, their obliviousness into my humiliation. Danger is ever present. “For many people, it is impossible to think without simultaneously thinking about what other people would think about what you’re thinking,” the educator Fredrik deBoer has written. “This is exhausting and deeply unsatisfying. As long as your self-conception is tied up in your perception of other people’s conception of you, you will never be free to occupy a personality with confidence; you’re always at the mercy of the next person’s dim opinion of you and your whole deal.”

In this world, nothing seems safe; everything feels like chaos. **THE CORONAVIRUS has confronted America with a social dilemma.** A social dilemma, the University of Pennsylvania scholar Cristina Bicchieri [notes](#), is “a situation in which each group member gets a higher outcome if she pursues her individual self-interest, but everyone in the groups better off if all group members further the common interest.” **Social distancing is a social dilemma.** Many low-risk individuals have been asked to endure some large pain (unemployment, bankruptcy) and some small inconvenience (mask wearing) for the sake of the common good. If they could make and keep this moral commitment to each other in the short term, the curve would be crushed, and in the long run we’d all be better off. It is the ultimate test of American trustworthiness.

By late June 2020, American national pride was lower than at any time since Gallup [started](#) measuring, in 2001. American happiness rates were at their lowest level in nearly 50 years. In another poll, **71 percent of Americans said they were angry about the state of the country, and just 17 percent said they were proud.** According to an [NBC News/Wall Street Journal](#) poll, 80 percent of American voters believe that “things in the country are out of control.” Gun sales in June were 145 percent higher than in the previous year. By late June, it was clear that America was enduring a full-bore crisis of legitimacy, an epidemic of alienation, and a loss of faith in the existing order.

For centuries, America was the greatest success story on earth, a nation of steady progress, dazzling achievement, and growing international power. That story threatens to end on our watch, crushed by the collapse of our institutions and the implosion of social trust.

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