

Stray Dogs and Homeless Persons — In Brazil and in the United States

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Some years ago, when I was a graduate student at the University of Oregon and living in Eugene, I had lunch with a former student from the Middle East. We were sitting outside at a corner cafe when a scruffy, collarless, unattended dog passed by on the sidewalk. He was surprised and remarked on the dearth of stray animals in America as compared to his home country. This was something that I had noted myself when abroad; I explained that animal control is taken seriously here and stray animals are quickly rounded up and taken to animal shelters.

“What happens to them there?” he asked.

“Well,” I replied, “they’re either adopted or are euthanized.”

He was shocked—horrified to be precise. I tried...stutteringly...to explain that it was seen as more humane that way...than to let them wander the streets, looking ragged...and the like.

“I don’t understand. Americans think it is more humane to kill the dogs than to just leave them alone?”

Now I was shocked. I had no idea how to respond. The answer, of course, was ‘Yes’...which is why Americans will never allow the question to be put in such a manner.

Nonetheless, I learned something very significant in that exchange: the profound extent to which our putative moral sentiments are often nothing but dissimulations intended to flatter our moral vanity and to conceal deeper immoral motives...and also how extraordinarily effective such camouflage is.

I lived in Eugene for nearly six years, from 2006 to 2011, and during the entirety of this period I stayed in decidedly low-income housing in Danebo and the Whittaker, neighborhoods where homelessness is and remains a major issue. For much of 2008-2010, there were a four or more cars parked around my block alone that were primary residences. Two blocks away there was an ice cream factory with a large veranda; on evenings when I would pass by with my dogs, it was not uncommon to see a half dozen souls sleeping underneath.

One evening someone knocked on my front door. It was late, so I responded with suspicion: “Can I help you?” The man was flummoxed at first: “I...um...I was wondering if...if you could help me out with a blanket.” There was a pause while I processed the question and its implications, then I excused myself and brought him one from the closet. Word must have gotten out after that: I received nocturnal

blanket requests from different people a few times a month for over a year. (Thankfully, they are very cheap at Walmart.)

On another evening, a year or so hence, I came home late to find someone sleeping on my front patio—a modest square of concrete the size of a twin bed. I went inside and got in my own bed, but the thought of someone spending the night on that cement slab vexed me. I got up and dug a backpacking mattress out of my closet and offered it to him. He was startled at first, thinking I was the police. He showed up again a couple weeks later, and I offered him the mattress again. After that I began just leaving it on my porch—it would have sat unused in my closet anyway—and he spent nearly every other night on my porch for six months. We never spoke after the second time I offered him the mattress, but I often thought about him after he stopped showing up. I wondered if he'd found somewhere else to stay...or if he had died.

This past summer, I spent three months living in a suburb of São Paulo, an enormous developing-world metropolis of twenty-million people, where beggary and homelessness is also a major social issue. Among a litany of other cross-cultural observations and realizations, this has afforded me an opportunity to compare the plight of the homeless here and in my old home town—and America in general.

I could offer any number of petty observations on such differences—e.g., the homeless back home seem to be predominately mentally disabled, while those in Brazil are often obviously physically disabled. The reason for this difference is obvious and needs little analysis; it is also, in spite of what I say below, a real and undeniable point in favor of ameliorative government programs for the disabled and disadvantaged.

Undoubtedly the most striking general difference between poverty and homelessness in Brazil and the United States, it would undoubtedly be the commercial *entrepreneurialism* of the destitute in Brazil that, aside from the narcotics trade, has no real analogue in America. This Brazilian petty-entrepreneurialism comes in two very distinct forms. The first, constituting the overwhelming majority, are the street vendors who congregate at public attractions, subway stations, and well-trafficked intersections. Unlike their American counterparts, they do not beg for money, but hawk gum, candies, bottled water, headphones, window cleaning services, and the like. If they hold up cardboard signs, they are not placards but advertisements for local businesses who pay them to do so. The second category of homeless Brazilians are more analogous to those in the United States, but likewise more entrepreneurial and direct. These people frequent buses and subway cars where they are assured a captive audience: as soon as the doors close, they begin a long, emotionally charged, and often surprisingly rhythmic lamentation (I heard one in dactylic hexameter). Those who lack the ability to vocalize their laments—the deaf—will beseechingly hand out small cards describing

their situation. While loud, numerous, and sometimes quite annoying, obscenities of this sort seem restricted to the blind or otherwise obviously disabled.

The Brazilian homeless are, in this regard, simply a reflection of Brazilian society at large. Brazil is a poor country, but, like almost all poor countries, it is poor by virtue of the relative absence of capital and economic reinvestment and not any general lack of economic activity; the poor in Brazil are constantly engaged in commercial activity, but its fruits are hand to mouth. At a time when, in the United States, the accumulation of capital and its cosseted alignment with the State has become the defining feature of our current socio-economic plight, there was something deeply refreshing about the yeomanry capitalism of Brazil—where every city is home to thousands of unique storefronts and street carts; where the people, poor though they might be, are nonetheless freeholders laboring for themselves and on their own terms. *Brazil is the paradise of small business*. And those Brazilians who do not labor for themselves—the supermarket cashiers, the subway ticket clerks, etc.—clearly betray in their despondence, which is taken to an almost comically robotic level far surpassing any US Postal worker, a clear recognition of what they have given up.

This entrepreneurial spirit, this desire to earn one's keep by one's own efforts, is a fundamental feature of traditional societies; one that, as Alexis de Tocqueville presciently noted in his *Mémoire sur le paupérisme*, is inevitably and fatally pulverized by the welfare state. In this way, Brazil, which simply cannot afford public welfare in all but trinket form, is a window into what has in the developed West become a lost and almost unthinkable alien civilization: *the world before welfare*.

Nonetheless, I would venture that the greatest difference between homelessness in Brazil and the United States has nothing to do with the homeless themselves, but rather with the attitude of the non-homeless towards them. Whether on the street or in subway cars, the Brazilian homeless and destitute are vastly more in your face than anything that is found (or would be tolerated) in the United States. Yet, in spite of that, not once was I ever left with the impression—which seems to so dominate American attitudes towards the homeless—that they are a class *de trop*. The able-bodied Brazilian homeless peddle because—as I saw on very many occasions—other Brazilians buy from them. The trinkets they sell could easily be acquired for less in a nearby supermarket, but it seems that many Brazilians take it upon themselves to buy from such vendors not only out of convenience, but out of kindness, charity, and solidarity. And the same is true of lamentations of the disabled homeless. In two months in Brazil, I have seen more people give to money to a homeless person—either as charity or in exchange—than in my entire life in the US.

While this observation was startling, the consistent and obvious division between the two penurious classes was more revealing: *Brazilians expect the able-bodied to peddle rather than beg*. Back in Eugene, placing such expectations on the homeless would be execrated as demeaning or reactionary. However, I soon realized

that, contrary to the common (or at least commonly professed) sentiments of most Americans, there is a fundamental reciprocity between Brazilians' charitable generosity and their social expectations: it is the very expectations that Brazilians place on the homeless that allows them to be regarded—even respected—as integrated members of *one and the same society*.

This leads to the question concerning the central difference between the Brazilian and American homeless—Why are the American homeless so lacking in entrepreneurialism by comparison? Why do they not peddle like their Brazilian counterparts? The difference is *not* because of a general 'laziness' on the part of the potential vendors; the yeoman's work many homeless put into collecting bottles and cans attests well enough to that. The difference is also *not* because of a lack of potential customers; Americans are a deeply charitable people who also greatly value convenience. Why, then, don't the American homeless peddle? *Because they are forbidden to.*

Under the same government-backed permit and licensing racket that oppresses small businesses everywhere, the homeless in America have been conceded the liberty to beg, but denied the liberty to sell. Not only is this a degradation of the most basic of human rights and a gross perversion of human values, but it makes precisely no sense on its own terms; it only begins to make sense when one realizes that the purpose of the permit/licensing racket is ever and always towards *the exclusion of undesirables from the public sphere*.

In spite of its overwrought *cri de coeur*, the progressive prescription towards homelessness is directed towards precisely that same end, offering palliatives and condescending welfare trinkets in the place of reciprocity and engagement. Expectation and exchange is the basis of mutuality and respect; pity and charity is often but derogation and ostracism concealed as fond-feeling; and so, by rescinding the former in favor of the latter, we have dehumanized the homeless and banished them to a shadow-society, socially and economically quarantined from the public marketplace. In depriving the homeless the human right—and it is that—to peddle goods and services, we have revoked their membership to wider society, the interactions of which are so dominated by enterprise and exchange.

The homeless in Brazil stand tall and erect in the public sphere, loudly proclaiming their goods and services—*what they have to offer society*. When they stand at trafficked intersections, they make their presence known, shouting and waiving their wares in the air, entering traffic to sell them window-to-window. At similar intersections in America, our homeless crouch with tattered signs, reducing their presence and profile—even in their body language—as much as possible, staring off into the distance rather than into the eyes of passers by, asking for alms but passively and inconspicuously, plying their trade as despondently as the Brazilian grocery clerks.

They do this because we demand it of them. They avoid eye contact because *we* avoid eye contact with them. They present themselves as pitiable despondent creatures because *we* have demanded that they do so. We demand that they beg, but not to make a spectacle out of it, not to *impose* upon us, not to make us feel their presence and condition except in the most minimal way possible.

In so banishing the homeless to the margins of society, we have come view them the way we view stray dogs: pitiable social problems who ought be removed from the public sphere...for their own good.

Brazilians also, I think, view the homeless in a manner analogous to stray dogs, but then they are of similar mind to Middle Eastern student regarding the latter. One evening in Goiania, a city in central Brazil, I ate dinner at a '*pitdog*'—a street restaurant specializing in cheap food and cheap beer. These establishments are analogous to our food carts, but, in the absence of cronyist government meddling (i.e. the permit/licensing racket), are vastly more popular and more fixed than in America, where insipid chain franchises dominate because they lobby politicians to regulate small competitors into oblivion. For obvious reasons, stray dogs commonly linger around such establishments; there was one present on this particular evening, but no one seemed to mind in the slightest. Strays here are typically neither scrawny nor bespotted with mange; they seem well fed by the locals, though they belong to none of them, and are left to themselves and their own free endeavors. Curious, I asked my hosts about the Brazilian attitude towards strays, mentioning the American attitude as a counterpoint. The American program of collecting and euthanizing such dogs was—as I expected—met with repugnance; the American dissimulation that this is done for the benefit of the animals themselves was met with bewilderment.

Let this serve, then, as a Brazilian counterpoint to the American attitude towards strays—human and animal alike.

The overwhelming reaction of Americans to the sight of stray animals is pity and sadness—we are emotionally burdened by their existence. As I learned from my hosts, the Brazilian reaction differs largely in degree rather than kind: strays are much more common here, so a certain inurement towards them is inevitable. Even so, it is the *response* to strays that is so utterly divergent. Brazilians take pity on strays and feed them, treating them with respect (not once here have I ever seen a stray dog struck, or even aggressively shooed) such they often become local fixtures and members of a community. That is to say, Brazilians adopt strays not individually but collectively, caring for them as members of their neighborhoods.

The American response is rather more dualistic: We either take pity on such creatures and adopt them personally, or, more likely, we call animal control. Nowhere in the United States is there anything like the communitarian care of strays found in Brazil, and the reason for this has undoubtedly to do with the difference in

attitude towards the animals themselves. For Brazilians, stray dogs are free members of a community; for Americans, they are social problems in need of either private or public removal. Brazilians *personally* provide strays with individual charities and then leave them to their own freedom; Americans regard their very existence as odious and either adopt them outright, or demand that *someone else* (i.e. the State) provide them with charities...or at least remove them from view and/or existence.

Insofar as personal adoption is not an option with human strays, the American response naturally and almost invariably slips into the second category. We do not meet the eyes of the homeless man at the intersection, nor do we put a coin in his coffer, but tell ourselves: *He is the government's responsibility*. We don't even call 'human control' ...we assume that someone else already has...or should have.

I would remark on the profound dehumanization of the homeless latent in this response, where fellow human beings are regarded in essentially the same manner as potholes; but it seems that it is precisely the humanity of the homeless that condemns them. How many times have I heard people, when passing a homeless man and his dog begging at an intersection, lament the fate of the animal rather than the man! Regardless of whether or not they are willing to adopt it themselves, the animal draws their attention and is an object of great pity; his best friend sitting next to him is nervously avoided by the eyes of all. He is not invisible, of course; nor does he entirely escape our notice. If he truly did so, we might look at him purely by chance. Rather, we see him enough to not see him; we acknowledge his existence in the farce of our pretending not to notice that he exists. (In older 'society' this was called 'cutting' someone.) We have thus come view the homeless *worse* than the way we view stray dogs.

Human strays are not privately adopted into loving families, nor are they left to their own freedom and enterprise.—In America, they are handed over by society and condemned as wards of the State. The value of this consignment lies in the admirable manner in which it reconciles American's fragile but malleable consciences with their fixed but easily satiated moral vanity...*and in the cheapest way possible*. It is this psychological dynamic that brings us, at last, to the peculiar attitude of the American non-homeless, and particularly those progressives who so populate my old home town.

I lived in famously liberal Eugene for over six years, but only twice did I ever witness a private citizen give anything other than grief or an averted gaze to a homeless person. This is ironic only if one assumes that there is any positive correlation between the political beliefs people profess, and the particular actions they undertake. In reality, it is not ironic at all, for the veritable touchstone of haute progressivism is the conviction not that something ought be done for the poor, but that *it ought be done by someone else*. As I have witnessed time and time again, there

is quite literally nothing a *soi-disant* progressive more loathes than being imposed upon to personally back their putative political convictions; and in the same way, there is nothing such a progressive more loves than the cognitive-dissonance release of not having to face such an imposition—i.e. the comfort of knowing that someone somewhere is (*or is supposed to be*) taking care of such things.

This desire is transparent in progressives' favorite prescriptions for the problem of homelessness, almost all of which are referred to the responsibility of the State, and foremost intended to *make the homeless go away*, while at the same time, but quite secondarily, offering a pleasant illusion as to where exactly they went away to.

Moreover, the secondary nature of the presentable fiction is evident in the shallowness of the progressive commitment to it. As amply attested by the remarkable insouciance of the Left to the profound and ongoing failure of New Deal and Great Society welfare programs, which have condemned millions upon millions of Americans to inter-generational poverty and dependency, the difference between whether someone else actually *is*, or is merely *supposed to be* helping the poor, is ultimately of exceedingly little consequence. What matters—first, foremost and always—is the freedom from personal imposition, responsibility, and the cognitive dissonance it generates.

In this way, and returning to the overarching analogy, American progressives are like parents faced with a pet they can no longer house. They want—first and foremost—for the dog to go away where it will no longer be a burden; and so, adoption not being an option, they drop it off at the pound. But they must also make pleasant lies for the children, and so tell them that Fido has indeed been adopted by a nice couple on a farm where he has plenty of room to run, rabbits to chase, and all such patently-false nonsense. But here is where the similarity breaks down: *actual* parents know the latter is a lie intended to conceal the reality of the situation from sentimental minds; American progressives, having spent the better part of their lives desensitizing themselves to the force of cognitive-dissonance, fill the role of *both* the parent and the child. Like the parent, they want, first and foremost, the burden removed; like the child, they want, quite secondary, for a comely fiction to embrace.

And so they pay the State their taxes, the State spends it on bureaucrats' pensions, and the homeless are both deprived of freedom and left to themselves at the same time. But, most importantly, we pass by that man laying in a disheveled heap on the sidewalk, greet him with our peripheral vision, and say inwardly to ourselves: 'Something should be done. I pay my taxes. *The government should do something.*' And then we order a fair trade Frappuccino and feel very good about ourselves.

Many commentators have argued that it is the welfare state which *causes* such callousness, by diffusing responsibility for one's fellows onto the legion governmental agencies which proclaim such matters as their purview. But this, I

think, takes the effect for the cause: it is precisely our abhorrence of such responsibility, our eager desire to not have to care, while still feeling good about ourselves, which assures the perpetuation of welfare state and its trillions upon trillions of dollars of funding every year.

Just how cheaply a human conscience may be allayed was, all told, the greatest lesson I learned in the six years I spent becoming a doctor of philosophy. The very people who most loudly proclaimed their progressive bonafides were the same people who would nervously avert their gaze from ‘George’, a homeless man who would panhandle right outside the hall where we worked. And they would eagerly defend their refusal of any modicum of alms with the universal retort always kept ready to hand: “Why isn’t the government doing something about this?” Merely asking such a question, merely by insisting that, in the perfect scheme of things, the government *ought* to be doing something—*this itself* is deemed sufficient to justify one’s own indurate attitude towards the immiseration of others.

It is virtually impossible to understate either the extent or the implications of this flight from guilt, dissonance, and personal responsibility. Essentially the entire political worldview of millions of Americans is driven by little else.

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