

**THE BLOG**

The Upside of Outrage

By Marty Kaplan

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A big reason that the Iraq war never ignited nationwide outrage on the scale of Vietnam protests was the absence of conscription. As long as the volunteer army confined the consequences of George W. Bush's Oedipal acting-out to one slice of America, taking it to the streets was just not how the country channeled its anger; telling it to the pollster was more like it.

But watching today's economic crisis touch people in every corner of the country, I wonder whether this democratization of catastrophe will turn out to be the match that finally lights the fire of reform.

Everyone is being hurt by this meltdown. People-like-us, not just people-like-them, are losing their jobs, homes, savings, dignity and dreams. If this were a natural disaster - a pandemic, say, or an earthquake - there would be mourning. But this calamity has human causes; there are villains' fingerprints all over it. So along with grief comes outrage, and along with outrage comes the potential for widespread protests, and along with widespread protests comes the scary side of organized anger: demagoguery, scapegoating, threats, violence, mobs.

Don't get me wrong. I find few sights as sweet as the groveling that corporate titans are now being forced to do.

Their years of reaping short-term profits instead of investing in long-term growth destroyed our economic competitiveness. Their legal bribery of politicians created a cult of deregulation and "supply side" tax cuts that caused a massive transfer of wealth to the rich from the rest, resulting in unprecedented inequities and disparities. The casino they built out of collateralized debt obligations and credit default swaps differed from Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme in size, but not in kind. Their obscene compensation - hundreds of times the earnings of average workers, a ratio that ballooned a thousand percent over the past two generations - drew those generations to Wall Street, where they bent their talent to making money instead of goods. Their conspicuous consumption was glamorized by a media that coined fawning new terms to describe them, like "masters of the universe," but forgot relevant old terms, like "robber baron" and "vulgarian."

They deserve all the humiliation they're reaping from their raping. But the populism uncorked by their bad behavior is as risky as it is refreshing.

If it was frightening to watch crowds at rallies for John McCain and Sarah Palin be whipped into ugly anger, it should also be troubling to hear talk radio talk and cable news noise about torchlight, pitchforks and garrottes. If Senator Joseph McCarthy's bullying of witnesses for names of alleged communists was alarming in the 20th century, it should be disturbing in the 21st to watch congressmen demand the names of the recipients of AIG bonuses. If racism, anti-semitism, homophobia and xenophobia were inflamed by Weimar Germany's financial collapse, why should today's global cataclysm be immune from analogous hate?

Last week *The Los Angeles Times* ran a large color photo with this caption: "HELPING HIMSELF: An Israeli takes items from the shelves of a supermarket in Hatzor Haglilit. As word spread that unhappy employees were looting, townsfolk joined in." In the picture, a clean-shaven guy in his thirties - polo shirt, sweater, jeans - is filling a yellow plastic grocery bag with packaged food. The floor of the supermarket aisle behind him is strewn with boxes and cans; the shelves have been ransacked. On his head, the man wears a yarmulke.

Unaccountably, the contrast between the meaning of that skullcap - here is a God-fearing man - and the meaning of his action - here is lawlessness - disturbed me as much as photos of devastation in Gaza, or of carnage wrought by suicide bombers in Tel Aviv. "In Israel, economic woes lead to looting" was the headline of the story. Is the veneer of civil society so thin, in Israel or America or anywhere else, that unemployment is an easy excuse for anarchy? We have all been chilled by images of looting in the wake of floods and riots. Will the Great Recession we have fallen into reveal that our culture, our values, our religion and our laws turn out to be pathetically flimsy barriers between the better angels of our nature and the volcanic rage these times are unleashing?

Sure, it's possible that our rising anger is little more than what Walter Shapiro in *The New Republic* calls "apolitical populism - a spasmodic outpouring of ideologically incoherent rage." In this reading, though popular outrage may cause Obama even more trouble than Republican obstructionism, it is unlikely to coalesce around a policy agenda, unlikely to kindle a movement the way the draft did.

But there's another possibility. Yes, our apoplexy poses terrible risks. But the opening for real reform that also accompanies it - an opportunity for justice, accountability, solving intractable problems, making essential investments - could turn out to be as game-changing for this era as Vietnam was to another. Obama didn't want, predict or deserve this disaster. But out of it may yet come a bigger opening for bigger change than anyone might have hoped to believe in.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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