The Underlying Causes of Left vs. Right Dysfunction in U.S. Politics

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In the aftermath of the last few election cycles, there is no longer any question that the political landscape of the United States is debillitatingly polarized, combative, toxic and dysfunctional.   And perhaps the seeds for those conditions have been lurking beneath the surface for some time – perhaps they are actually cultural in nature, rather than ideological. What is less clear, however, are the actual causes of that cultural and political tension and brokenness. There are of course loud and pedantic blame-games issuing from all corners of that discussion, and these routinely align with a given political ideology or cultural bias, but it has always been a source of confusion and irritation for me that these often authoritative pronouncements seem to be missing something; that they speed right past many of the fundamentals in play, and frame every argument in what are essentially superficial conditions far down the causal chain. We will touch upon some examples of this later on, but for now let's focus on those missing fundamentals: on the root causes of the Left/Right divide, *and why each side is actually operating from similar faulty foundations*. In other words, let's focus on the shared ground of error from which the superficial divisions have arisen and become so amplified.

First to lay some groundwork….

Modes of Personal-Social Agency

In order to understand the agency dynamics in play for any position along a cultural, political or ideological spectrum, we require a rough framework for measurement. Here is a proposed matrix to assess that agency, with variables that aim to be self-defining, but that will be further clarified in examples to follow:

	Willing Agreement	Sacrificial-Beneficial Compromise	Non-Voluntary Imposition
1. Self-Referential (impact on me)	0-100%	0-100%	0-100%
2. Collectively Negotiated (impact on my tribe/group/identity)	0-100%	0-100%	0-100%
3. Cultural/Systemic (impact on social norms & presumed status quo)	0-100%	0-100%	0-100%
4. Codified/Institutional/Structural (impact on formalized structures of civil society)	0-100%	0-100%	0-100%

To illustrate how this matrix could be applied, let's evaluate a topic using a speculative percentage for each variable as a placeholder. As our first attempt we'll examine an established social norm, which also happens to be codified in law.

Murder is Wrong and Must Be Prohibited – With Some Exceptions	Willing Agreement	Sacrificial-Beneficial Compromise	Non-Voluntary Imposition
1. Self-Referential (impact on me)	Unless someone is suicidal, terminally ill, severely depressed or mentally ill, they generally do not want to be murdered, or to *arbitrarily* murder someone else. So let's say **97%** willingly agree.	Again, the benefits to oneself are obvious, so the sacrifice to forestall one's own murderous impulses, or the arbitrary impulses of someone else, are also obvious (to all but psychopaths). **99%** recognize the trade-off benefits.	Only a severely mentally ill, terminally ill, or depressed person would consider their own murderous impulses (or the *arbitrary* murderous impulses of someone else) to be morally "good." So **1-3%** experience oppression.
2. Collectively Negotiated (impact on my tribe/group/identity)	As it is already codified law, the only negotiations exist around "what kind of murder is justified" – that is, in war, the death penalty, abortion, self-defense, use of lethal force by law enforcement, etc. – with fairly even divisions across these issues in the U.S. So let's say about **50%** willingly agree with a blanket, unconditional prohibition, while the other **50%** have detailed exceptions.	Again, in the public debate, perhaps **50%** recognize the benefits of sacrificing personal agency regarding killing others as a fairly universal standard, while another **50%** advocate more selective, conditional prohibitions – and for different kinds of exceptions.	Once again, perhaps **50%** feel that *not* allowing them to carry out certain "justifiable" murders is an imposition on their agency in certain circumstances. Critically, however, it will be a different 50% based on which exception is in play: "pro-death penalty" does not equate "pro-right to die."
3. Cultural/Systemic (impact on social norms & presumed status quo)	This changes via sub-culture, situational threat, self-righteous anger, moral maturity, religious beliefs, violent environments, etc., but likely **>90%** willingly agree with "murder is wrong" as a generalized social norm along with its necessary prohibition…as long as there can be exceptions.	As a social construct to support societal cohesion in most contexts, likely **>90%** across all groups support a broad prohibition (even Right-Libertarians subscribe to the *non-aggression principle*). However, different groups will have different definitions of "murder," based on the values of their particular tribe (especially within the more extreme ideological groups).	Very few folks would feel this is an unjustifiable imposition to regulate society, so likely **<10%** across all groups might object to this governing principle.
4. Codified/Institutional/Structural (impact on formalized structures of civil society)	This changes based on a combination of factors from all of the considerations in variables 1-3 above, but we could use the mean of **79%** as a placeholder for support of institutional and lawful prohibition of murder, with certain exceptions aloud.	Tacit, non-resistant agreement with laws & institutions for the *appearance* of a stable civil society is probably close to **99%** - even if it is just to "fit in" with society (i.e. even psychopaths and the terminally ill will comply with a perception of law-abiding behavior for appearance's sake).	Again the considerations in variables 1-3 impact this metric, so for now we could speculate a mean of **21%** might object to institutions and laws that restrict or punish certain acts of murder in specific circumstances.

These are just speculative numbers, but they offer a basis for equally speculative comparison. So let's examine the "murder matrix" in some different, more granular contexts to further navigate its nuances, and to see how it holds up.

1. A Gang Member in a Poor Neighborhood

Self-referentially, murder might voluntarily be considered immoral. However, this group would likely be part of the 21% that feel the laws and institutions of civil society do not appreciate or accommodate their circumstances and living conditions, and part of the 10% who feel actively oppressed by broader cultural norms. Certainly, they are part of the 50% that feels a disproportionate impact of "murder is wrong" attitudes on the collective agency of their group and identity, because the exceptional circumstances of their day-to-day lives are not fully understood. If someone believes that their whole family – and certainly their own life – is at risk if they do not retaliate with "eye-for-an-eye" killing, then the intervention of law enforcement and the more generalized expectations of society that "murder is wrong" will be at odds with the realities of their circumstances. For them, subjectively and objectively, such expectations and interventions amount to substantive interference with their liberty and right to exist.

2. A Conservative Parent of Teenager Who Is Obtaining an Abortion without Their Consent

If the law of the land prohibits the parent from interfering with their teen's seeking an abortion, this places that parent squarely in the 50% of those who believe that their conservative pro-life "tribe" is being oppressed and controlled by societal norms, and also in the 21% of folks who feel civil society is depriving them of agency and liberty, and the 10% who feel victimized by societal norms that conflict with their values around a specific definition of "murder." Why? Because, if the parent sincerely believes that abortion itself equates murder, this constitutes a state-sanctioned violation of their values and the perceived freedoms of the unborn child in the context of "murder is wrong" – regardless of the fact that such sanctioning, in turn, may be supported by the broader cultural spirit of the times.

3. A Terminally Ill Elderly Person Who Wants to End their Own Suffering

If such a person is of sound mind, but the law of the land prohibits them from legally and mercifully ending their own life, this places that patient squarely in the 50% of those who believe that their right to die "tribe" is being oppressed and controlled by societal norms in unjustifiable ways, in the 21% of folks who feel civil society is depriving their group of personal agency and liberty – but likely *not* among the 10% who feel the moral standard of "murder is wrong" has a disproportionate impact on them personally (because they appreciate the exceptionality, subjectivity and moral complexity of their situation). In this case, then, such a differentiation is meaningful.

4. A Person Wrongly Accused and Convicted of a Capital Offense, and is Consequently Sentenced for Execution

With the introduction of new genetic evidence in the appeals of recent years, wrongful conviction appears to be a problem of epidemic proportions in the U.S. criminal justice system. And even though such a convicted felon might happily participate in the "willing agreement" percentages of all four "murder matrix" variables, they are also among the 21% who believe their own agency in the matter has been wrongfully interfered with under cultural and legal standards.

Here again, they may also be among the 10% who feel oppressed and constrained by the imposition of those values – because they have been wrongly accused and convicted.

5. A Person Defending Their Family from a Home Invasion

For those who live in a U.S. State with a home defense "castle doctrine," a person who defends their family with lethal force and incidentally causes an intruder's death may not be charged with murder or manslaughter if they did not have an opportunity to retreat during the confrontation. So they fall neatly within all of the majority percentages in all variables. But what if the place where that person lives does not include such a castle doctrine in its local laws…? Now that person must witness their family being frightened, traumatized and possibly killed, without any *justifiable* ability to decisively defend their family from harm – without being at risk of legal liability. This may therefore place the non-castled home-defender among the 10% who feel victimized by societal norms in such a situation, and the 21% who feel oppressed by civic institutions.

6. A Conscientious Objector when Drafted into Military Service

Conscientious objectors are outliers – they are part of the 10% who feel society unjustly compels them to murder (as a specific exception) when they feel it is immoral, and the 21% who experience structural oppression from compulsory military service in the case of a draft. In the U.S., a person must *prove* their ethical or religious objections to military service and/or participating in lethal combat – this cannot be a capricious, political, philosophical or selective conviction, but must be clearly evidenced in a person's life as a "firm, fixed and sincere" moral or religious view. And yet, if they do not meet the expected minimum requirements of a particular time (and these have a wide variation since WWI), then they will be deemed insincere *and either compelled to murder against their will, or sent to prison for not doing so*.

These are probably sufficient illustrations of the challenge before us: we simply can't impose universal, black-and-white rules across all of society without appreciating the modes of agency in play, the sometimes extraordinary conditions within which any given situation unfolds, and the unintended consequences of creating overly rigid or bureaucratic systems. The tendency to overly homogenize is, of course, often driven by an understandable need for standardization. What if, every time we crossed a city limit in our car, we had to abide by different rules? Here we drive on the left side of the road, there on the right. Here there are strictly enforced speed limits, there no speed limits exist. Here there are regular gas stations and rest stops, there gasoline and restrooms are only available in private, gated communities. This would be ridiculous, so standardization is necessary to avoid complete chaos and amplified risks. Add to this the snowballing complexity of modern life; the leap-frogging of new technologies; the exploding scope of mass communication; the frenetic intersections of countless and varied cultures around the globe; the increasing immediacy and interplay of all economic relationships – even as production itself becomes more and more abstracted from most

people's lives; the rapidly growing personal and collective knowledgebase required for basic navigation of routine daily choices – and the sophistication of information utilized in that navigation; the confusing and ever-enlarging contexts for all assumptions and decisions; and so on. *Of course we crave simplicity and black-and-white answers with all of this descending on us.* Of course we want a convenient, familiar, manageable handle on this astoundingly complex reality. Of course we want to reduce all rulesets to provide us with manageable, binary choices. How could we not?

But, in the case of many morally derived standards that impact personal or collective agency, arriving at common denominators is more difficult – especially in such diverse contexts as those presented by a modern technological society. And this is especially true when multiple cultures are involved, different belief systems are in play, innovation accelerates generational change and knowledge evolutions, and where increased standards of living, information access, and technology utilization create an ever-broadening equalization and enlarging of agency across all of society. Just consider that a clever teenager with a computer and Internet access, or a mentally ill person with a semi-automatic weapon and high capacity magazine, both have more individual agency than the majority of human beings who have ever lived on Earth – regardless of their position in society. In other words, a huge number of modern humans can instantaneously attain a kind of *individual superagency* that rivals the power that warlords, royalty and the wealthiest elite aimed to cultivate in past ages *across generations of extraordinary effort*. Under such conditions, binary suppositions and choices just don't cut it. We cannot rely on the clarity and simplicity of black-and-white reasoning *at all, ever*. Why? Because negative consequences are too immediate and extreme. There is no wiggle-room for error. And yet…for our own sanity and emotional security, we are compelled to cling to outmoded patterns of thought, and to values hierarchies that inherently conflict with the an ever-emerging, increasingly interdependent picture of the world. Which is how our very yearning for stability creates instability. This is a primary tension of our times.

In this way we can begin to recognize the underlying, shared error of both Left and Right politics and ideologies in the U.S. They both fail to recognize this fundamental shift in the ground game of life – in our understanding, communication, knowledge, decision-making and indeed agency itself. They are both stuck in a wrong-headedness that has failed to adapt or adjust to modernity, and often ends up amplifying the same mistakes into a storm of absurd replications. Consider how the 50/50 split in "collectively negotiated" determinations regarding exceptions in the "murder is wrong" matrix has become so problematic. If we focus on just this variable, we begin to see conflicting attitudes and values around what has not already been fully agreed upon across society – and we see them clearly in the six more granular contexts discussed thereafter. This is where worldviews can potentially collide. And yet, in cases of assertions and priorities on both the Left and the Right, we can often surmise that the basis for differing approaches do not rely on any sort of supportive evidence, but mainly the whims, incorrect assumptions and willfulness of each group. Differences on right to die, parental consent for teen abortions, the castle doctrine, death sentencing and conscientious

objection are profoundly personal, emotional, spiritual or deeply cultural, and do not lend themselves to a "one size fits all approach." Likewise, the unique experiences and dynamics in poor neighborhoods with gang violence cannot be rigidly addressed within exactly the same social and legal framework as less volatile, more affluent neighborhoods. In all of these cases, evidenced-based solutions do exist, and we'll cover some of those later on, but the enduring resistance to patient, systematic and rational approaches to these challenges is also understandable.

That said, it seems a worthy goal to eliminate these shared errors on the Left and the Right, and encourage a relaxation of rigid, black-and-white reasoning, an openness to evidenced-based, pragmatic approaches, and a willingness to dialogue around a clear "sacrificial-beneficial compromise" for each unique situation when required. So how can this be accomplished? Well, we should recognize this entire process would need to be insulated from propaganda and misinformation campaigns that disrupt rational discourse in favor of knee-jerk emotional reactivity – something we will discuss more fully later in this essay. And there are undoubtedly many other helpful components, such basic education and fostering critical thinking skills among the voting public, access to reliable information in order to make higher quality decisions, news media that does not distort its reporting to appease ideologies or advertisers, and perhaps even a way for the electorate to vote directly on important issues – without the interference of corporately-appointed elected officials. How to address complex or nuanced exceptions is itself a complex and nuanced task, which is why we can't approach it with polarized thinking, oversimplified narratives, or binary solutions. In the context of this essay, it is therefore ironic that we must even frame the U.S. sociopolitical landscape in terms of "Left" and "Right," as this dualistic condition further aggravates conflict and constrains solutions. So solving this challenge will be testing ground for new ways of thinking, being and doing. Hopefully, some of the framing found here around modes of personal and social agency will resonate with those willing to step outside of conditioned habits – that is, **outside of the boxes designed to keep the Left and Right from ever finding common ground.** But this is only a first step.

The second step is recognizing another critical component to the politically paralyzing mix, and that is a pervasive tendency to externalize our own agency, and consequently embrace a victim identity. This is another pattern that prevails on both the Left and the Right, adding to the dissonance of the discourse. So that's what we'll explore next.

Externalizing, Self-Victimizing Abdication of Agency

From the earliest ages of childhood, Americans are conditioned by our dominant culture not to respond to our internal intuitive promptings, or to pursue careful reasoning and consideration, or to discuss and evaluate conclusions with other thoughtful people, but rather to rely on external authorities, peer pressure, the groupthink of our tribe of origin, and to reflexively respond to commercial calls-to-action. This is our cultural norm. Some of these tendencies do indeed seem

to be hardwired – a consequence of humans evolving as social critters that need to belong and integrate with their environment in order to survive. It's just that U.S. society quite literally "capitalizes" on those tendencies, amplifying them to an alarming degree. So much so that, over time, Americans develop a strong habit of reflexively accepting what a chosen authority claims is true, or unquestioningly complying with peer pressure, or unconsciously buying what we are persuaded to buy as a consequence of repeat advertising and marketing exposure. Americans thereby end up *reacting* to externals, rather than *acting* according to our internal compass of values, discernment and conscience.

Don't have a love-life? No problem: Just buy this new product that will make you sexy and attractive. Feeling a little down? No problem: Ask your doctor for this new psychoactive drug. Overweight and out-of-shape? No problem: Buy into this diet and exercise program. Feeling spiritually adrift? Join this religious institution. Tired of not being able to afford the lifestyle you want? Try this multi-level marketing scheme. Frustrated about the direction the country is taking? Join this political party. Angry about the lack of opportunity and economic mobility for your kids? Blame the immigrants and vote for me to fix it! And, all the while, the subtle but persistent pattern in play is an ever-increasing abdication of personal agency, along with a swelling self-identification as a helpless victim. And this is how we end up not taking much personal responsibility for conditions in our lives, but instead blame others and try to control them. This is how we create elaborate, self-deceiving illusions of personal efficacy, *while actually destroying our own power*.

This victim mentality and voluntary giving away of agency then lead to a strange distortion of what activism and self-liberation look like for any given challenge, which in turn end up being reflected in both social mores and, ultimately, even legislated legal prescriptions and proscriptions. If a student doesn't feel emotionally safe or comfortable on their school campus for some reason, *that school's culture needs to change*. If a religious person doesn't feel their religious practices are accepted or respected by their community, *that community needs to demonstrate respect and acceptance in some way*. If a workplace isn't being inviting or accommodating to a disabled person, *the workplace should conform to that person's needs*. If a woman feels a man is being misogynistic or inappropriate in his behavior in ways that make her uncomfortable, *that man must change his attitudes and behaviors or be publically humiliated*. If a transgender person feels wounded or oppressed by others who do not use their pronoun of choice*, those others are asked to adopt usage of that pronoun*. If someone living with mental illness is being triggered by how the people around them are acting or speaking, *those others are expected to learn to be more trauma-aware, and adjust their language and behaviors*. If people of color feel that all white people at their college should acknowledge society's pervasive white privilege, *then all white people should demonstrate that acknowledgement by leaving college property for a day*.

Can you see the correlations here? Because of a culture that is steeped in a Zeitgeist of externalized agency and personal helplessness, all remedies to any problem must be actualized by *others*, rather than internally navigated and

owned by the person who feels vulnerable or victimized. And what this does, ironically, is just gift others with more agency, while eviscerating our own agency. In each of the cases described in the preceding paragraph, the oppressors retained all of the power in the given situation. *The perceived offenders were gifted the responsibility for all of the outcomes, and anointed with all of the agency to reify a just or fair result*. And so the party that feels the most oppressed in these examples is really just oppressing themselves further, by relinquishing more of their own agency and relying on the conformance of others to feel empowered.

And what can we confidently say about human beings who are forced to comply with someone else's will in order to remedy a given situation? Well, if that person does not agree with the values being imposed on them, they will simply resent the imposition. The mother who does not think stealing an apple to feed her hungry child is "wrong" will not learn from being punished for that theft – except, perhaps, to be more devious and careful next time. The child who does not feel defending their sibling from bullies on the playground was "wrong" won't learn not to do so if they are punished by the school administrator – instead, they will likely find ways to retaliate against the bullies after school or off of school grounds. Research has shown that, when drivers feel a posted speed is unreasonable – or believe that it has been implemented for political reasons – *they think it's safe to exceed the speed limit and break the law.*[1] This is the problem with imposing rules that lack willing agreement, have no clear sacrificial-beneficial trade-off, and are experienced mainly as a non-voluntary imposition.

And this is how we come full circle to modes of personal-social agency. Those considerations – all of those variables of self-referential, collectively negotiated, cultural/systemic and institutional/structural agency in the proposed matrix – must be carefully considered, discussed and agreed upon via highly distributed and participatory mechanisms, in order for a given set of societal expectations or laws to be successfully implemented and sustained across different contexts. Otherwise, we are just reinventing new forms of tyranny and unwanted impositions. This is why, in my work on a Level-7 political economy (see www.level-7-org.), I have emphasized the need to address moral development and maturity as a prerequisite for implementing any advanced, egalitarian framework. In the case of progressive, compassion-centered, evidence-based solutions, it is really not possible to enact them when a large portion of society is not morally prepared to do so. And if low levels of personal maturity have, in turn, been permissively reinforced by an existing I/Me/Mine culture of individualistic materialism – over many decades – how can we ever hope to implement higher-order systems of self-governance and economics without first addressing moral and social development itself…?

To clarify, let's illustrate this further with another *modes of agency* matrix.   This time, let's consider something with a more targeted or specialized context, but which nevertheless has been broadly implemented: sex education.

Sex-Ed Helps Pre-Teens Make Safer, Better Choices	Willing Agreement	Sacrificial-Beneficial Compromise	Non-Voluntary Imposition
1. Self-Referential (Parents) (impact on me)	In countless national surveys, over many years, most parents willingly agree that children should receive general sex education in school.[2] **93%**	To most parents, the benefits of sex-ed are obvious, and the sacrifice of their child's ignorance is well worth protection from STDs, unplanned pregnancies, confusion and pain. **93%**	Very few parents feel as though even general sex-ed is an imposition on them or their children, or that it interferes with their values and choices. **7%**
2. Collectively Negotiated (Parents) (impact on my tribe/group/identity)	There isn't much disagreement over sex education, but there is debate over what should be included and how explicit certain topics should be.[3] So this is an area that invites negotiation. **70%**	The public debate leans heavily toward responsible sex-education, but there is active resistance to the most explicit, "comprehensive" sex-ed curricula from conservative religious groups, and an agenda to prioritize abstinence-only programs. Nevertheless, roughly **70%** support comprehensive sex-ed.	The only real "imposition" question in a collective negotiation sense seems to be which takes priority in sex-ed: *abstinence or contraception,* and whether "comprehensive," more explicit and diverse sexual information should be taught. There are **>30%** who feel *not* teaching abstinence-only is an imposition.[4]
3. Cultural/Systemic (impact on social norms & presumed status quo)	Here we begin to brush up against a cultural divide between the Left and the Right – particularly social conservatives in rural areas and liberals in cities – regarding educational curricula. Still, while **93%** want sex-ed taught, some **91%** would also like abstinence to be part of that curriculum.[5]	Prior to Right-wing, religiously-based opposition to sex-ed curricula in rural areas, this was a non-issue. But the linking of Planned Parenthood to sex-ed in school districts and other fomenting of outrage caused a recent surge of opposition to sex-ed programs[6,7] – and a continuing antagonism to what was already a downward trend in implementing those curricula.[8] **70%**	**>30%** of parents feel that abstinence-only curricula and less explicit information about sexual acts should be a priority, and oppose "comprehensive" sex-ed.
4. Codified/Institutional/Structural (impact on formalized structures of civil society)	Again, rural/metro regional differences shape very different priorities and approaches, reflecting different levels of "willing agreement" based on the curriculum involved. We can use the generic **93%** support number fo general sex-ed, but quickly need to take a more targeted approach based on regions and demographics.	93%	7%

There are three central considerations for understanding the "sex-ed matrix" above. The first is that, just as we might see indicated on Red and Blue electoral maps, rural and urban cultures and values around some topics can be very different. The second is that the specific content of the sex-ed curriculum has tremendous impact on the level of parental support for that curriculum. The third is that the data has been accumulating on "abstinence-only" sex-ed approaches, and it's not good: both teen pregnancy rates and birthrates increase when abstinence-only curricula are the

primary emphasis.[9,10] What this indicates is that evidence-based approaches to sex-ed will include more thorough, comprehensive, detailed discussion of sexuality and contraception. Not doing so is just a bad idea.

But here it is again: escalating conflict over what curriculum should be used at what age represents additional abdication of personal agency and perpetuation of victimhood. And what is the core abdication in this particular case? *Parenting.* The entire discussion orbits around how the school system is performing a job that parents accept the responsibility for in most other cultures,[11,12] but which parents in the U.S. have tended to shirk.[13] So a vitriolic tug-of-war has played out in school board meetings and online forums, with parents screaming at each other, demanding that their (competing) values be honored and prioritized in the public sphere in a black-and-white, universal way. Why? *So that someone else will take on the task they do not want to do themselves, while also demonstrating deference and sensitivity to their values and priorities.* What more potent example could there be of misplaced effort and projecting personal responsibility onto others? And, truthfully, isn't this immature behavior the real nature of the problem…? Isn't this kind of behavior what we ask teenagers to abandon, in order to demonstrate they have become adults? It suggests that the conditioning of Americans into a persistent, externalizing, self-victimizing abdication of agency has toddlerized multiple generations of adult-aged citizens. If more folks simply woke up to their own toddlerized condition, would that help us navigate some of these conflicting perspectives? Maybe even quiet the angry rhetoric a bit?

It is really the same pattern of helpless victimhood which demands that workplaces, institutions, communities, businesses, school campuses and other external environments meet a perceived need – a projection of agency onto others to solve our own challenges and take over our own responsibilities. This habit so saturates American culture that it can be difficult to appreciate the scope involved, but consider the U.S. election process itself as a glaring illustration. Americans generally pay very little attention to the efforts of local governments, state legislatures or national representatives on a day-to-day basis. Almost all awareness is focused on periodic elections, ballot initiatives, and major controversies that arise during the election cycle itself – and even then, U.S. citizens trail other developed countries in even voting at all.[14] With a 56% voter turnout in the 2016 U.S. elections, let's call American participation in their democracy "lukewarm" at best – also recognizing the fact that mid-term and local elections generally experience even lower turnouts. And how does this indicate "abdication of agency?" Well, if people don't pay close and *persistant* attention to issues being voted on in their local and national governments, don't participate in the voting process much, and often don't even know who their government representatives are,[15] *then they simply are not really participating in their own governance*. By restricting their lukewarm interest in democracy to an occasional vote, U.S. citizens have essentially given up their voice and power in the political process. Until, of course, they have an opportunity to vent on social media, or rage in response to a provocative Op-Ed piece, or otherwise whine and complain about consequences

they themselves created by shirking their responsibility to be informed and engaged. It's all part of the same toddler behavior.

Yet even if there were a widespread willingness of Americans to "wake up and grow up," and self-liberate from their victim identity, what options are available to advocate for the many issues alluded to thus far?   How could folks regain meaningful agency in their lives? Let's look at the sex-ed issue. Parents could demand they be provided better educational tools and resources for themselves to introduce complex topics of sexuality, contraception, intimacy and romance to their children – in fact, this is how parents have informed and empowered themselves in other countries.[16] This completely eliminates the imposition of unwanted information on those children whose parents object to comprehensive sex-ed curricula in schools. This would of course mean that some children would not have accurate or helpful information about their own sexuality – or how to prevent pregnancy – and that, as statistics have already shown, those children will be at greater risk for teen pregnancy and births. However, as a consequence, perhaps these young people will then be much more interested in relieving the ignorance of their own kids, so as to avoid the same disadvantages. That is, the young people who had persisting ignorance willfully imposed on them will "wake up and grow up" to the fact that this approach is not helpful. This may just be how generational moral maturity has to happen: the failures of one generation will spark a desire to remedy the problem in the next generation. But in this instance, we will have effectively changed the percentage in the "willing agreement" and "sacrificial-beneficial compromise" columns of the sex-ed matrix to a much higher number by allowing some regional variability.

What about the other self-advocacy issues touched upon earlier? Regarding *emotional safety*: there are plentiful modes of proven therapy available to help people cope with their internal emotional landscapes, and there is no reason that fluid and effortless access to counselling resources shouldn't be available to everyone who needs them. In the U.S. there has actually been a longstanding shortage of mental health professionals,[17] and of course it's not just availability but also cost that can be a major disincentive. Add to this the persisting cross-cultural stigma of "mental illness" and of consulting a therapist, the ever-increasing stresses and complexity of modern life, the widespread availability of substances (alcohol, marijuana, nicotine, herbal supplements, etc.) to "self-medicate" for symptoms of mental illness without any medical intervention or consultation, and the reflexive dispensing of psychoactive pharmaceuticals for every perceived symptom by psychiatrists and physicians without psychiatric training…and, well, it's really no surprise that there is mounting evidence of an exploding mental illness epidemic.[18,19] So the acute and even disabling vulnerability being experienced by many folks – around identity, sexuality, social acceptance, gender, and mental illness – can be very real and deeply felt. But the most effective way to heal and strengthen oneself is not to ask other people to adjust their language, behavior or attitudes. Interior turmoil cannot be ameliorated with external controls. This would be, as a central theme of this essay, an absurdly ineffective way to address one's own emotional state, inspiring a

world where everyone is codependently "walking on eggshells" around everyone else. Instead, what if mental health professionals were as readily available – and as inexpensive – as a weekly alcohol purchase, mild marijuana habit, or daily herbal supplement? And what if therapy itself was considered as "hip" and ordinary as these other approaches? We know that therapy – especially proven and reliable forms like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) – is a hell of a lot more effective than arbitrary psychoactive drug sampling. So why not – as a culture, as a society, as a political economy – prioritize access and social acceptance of therapy instead…?

Now imagine a transgender person who can easily obtain educational information, healthcare, emotional and psychological support, voice training, gender reassignment surgery and hormonal support, and who could transition at the time of their choosing after careful preparation. Imagine if there were also free retreats for young people, where they could experiment with how they presented themselves, or explore how others responded to them in a supportive environment, or have a safe space to share experiences and feelings around dysphoria? Would removing barriers to such services and support lessen the trauma and social challenges of presenting in a body that does not feel right? Intuitively, you would think so, and – depending on the study cited – between 71% and 90% of those who successfully transition feel much better about their lives, their bodies and their sexuality after transition.[20] But, more importantly in the context of this essay, would a transgender individual with such options and resources feel as strong a need to request or expect others to address them by a preferred pronoun prior to transition? Wouldn't knowing they could present as the gender they experience inside – and having support and relief from isolation and alienation through an empathetic community – be a huge advantage in navigating resistance from society? Perhaps even providing a sense of confidence, security and control that might otherwise be projected outward onto others…? Here again, a self-liberating, self-empowering, self-transforming person may simply have less impetus to abdicate their agency to others by expecting any external conformance to their preferences.

For me personally, the greatest takeaway from my own cultural experiences and cultural sensitivity training, women's studies education and personal interactions with feminism, relationships with people of color and members of the GLBTQ community, a childhood spent in many different ethnic communities, and living and travelling abroad for many years, is this: being conscious of my own white straight male American privilege, and of the really broad diversity of experience that others go through – in particular as non-white, or non-straight, or non-male, or non-Americans – has been an incredibly enriching series of *ahas*. That awareness is invaluable in my appreciation and understanding of other people, other cultures, and myself – and I also realize that this, in itself, is *privileged information*, a consequence of having access to education and experiences that are fairly unique. At the same time, a secondary but also important takeaway has been that I can, should and will heartily resist giving up my own hard-won identity, or changing my spiritual orientation, or altering my appearance and mannerisms, or constantly code-switching my language, or

suppressing or containing my thoughts, emotions and attractions to an unhealthy degree. If I remain willing and open, practicing non-defensive and compassionate listening – that is, really hearing from someone else how my words, attitudes or actions impact them – then that is enough. I am not required to own another person's suffering as my own, or to respond codependently…just as I would never want to impose my own suffering on others. Is this my white straight male American privilege talking? A bit of it, to be sure. But it is also my *humanity* talking…the same humanity whose heart soars when I hang with gays and lesbians, blacks and Latinos, Germans and Chinese people, musicians and writers, transgendered and queer folk, credentialed intellectuals and blue-collar friends…and get to witness the joy, richness and warmth *of people relaxing and just being themselves*. For me, that is the real celebration of agency: embracing others as they express their own being, even as I am embraced for who I am. *And this is, indeed, a privilege of safety and security in oneself that everyone should share.*

Sadly, there is yet another factor contributing to why Americans don't shift away from an agency-abdicating, self-victimizing model into a self-aware and self-empowering one…and, unfortunately, this factor plays right into the very dynamics we've already explored that keep U.S. consumers in such a toddlerized and helpless state. What follows is an examination of that issue.

The Final Straw: Managing the Actual Divide Between Left & Right

Despite similar errors in judgement and shared abdication of agency, we cannot ignore some of the apparent philosophical and cultural divisions between Left and Right – especially with regards to methods. As a progressive, when I engage in dialogue with conservative acquaintances and friends, it is inevitable that we surprise ourselves with many shared primary values, but also with how differently we have concluded those values should be actualized. In so many cases, we will find agreement on desired outcomes, but disagree vehemently about the best method to arrive at those outcomes. Even when we both affirm that relying on evidence-based methodology is the best means to solving problems, the quality and quantity of evidence is then most frequently what comes into question. We inevitably have different standards of evidence, different authorities and sources, different historical explanations for events, and different ways of parsing a given set of variables or information as we deliberate over best practices. *In other words, we have entirely different knowledgebases*. And, unfortunately, this is where the voluminous propaganda from neoliberal think tanks, conservative religious organizations, right-leaning news outlets, neoconservative pundits, and far-right conspiracists can overwhelm an otherwise fair-minded, critical-thinking conservative. The pressure to conform to an almost lockstep parallelism of tribal groupthink is truly breathtaking within conservative communities – the center of gravity for highly confined thought-adherence there has been immensely and powerfully concentrated – and so this groupthink has become a black hole that even the most honest, sincere and compassionate conservative cannot easily

escape. Add to this the advent of highly insular conservative media spheres,[21] and the scant possibility for illumination or openness seems utterly vanquished.

And so it is important to call attention to the apparent source of much of that lockstep groupthink, and why a conservative's knowledgebase departs so radically from what are generally considered "settled" facts in nearly all relevant academic and scientific disciplines – and consequently, from most evidence-based solutions. First, what follow are some of the primary tenets that govern right-leaning knowledge frames; you will notice that they often come in complimentary pairs, which may be an important factor in understanding how knowledge that departs from facts is cemented:

1a. All academic or government research is hopelessly biased, warping available data to conform to progressive agendas, and thus inherently flawed and inaccurate.

1b. Conversely, all neoliberal, libertarian and religious conservative think tank research is substantively less biased, and therefore much more accurate.

2a. All government programs are hopelessly inefficient, excessively bureaucratic, and nearly always result in unanticipated consequences.

2b. Privatized, corporate efforts to solve the same problem or meet the same need within a competitive market are always much more efficient and responsive, and hardly ever produce unanticipated consequences.

3a. Concentrations of wealth, and the consequences of that wealth influencing political and legislative processes, are a healthy feature of a successful market economy, and inherently help address concerns of the Founding Fathers regarding a "mob rule" of democracy (i.e. the Founding Fathers notably allowed only *white men with land* to vote in the Republic's initial configuration).

3b. Any attempts to disrupt capital flows (into the coffers of the wealthiest owner-shareholders) – or to strengthen democratic processes and civic institutions to a degree that can effectively counter plutocratic influence – are inherently counterproductive to free market capitalism and the rightful reign of the wealthy.

4a. Growth-dependent capitalism is the greatest engine of progress that has ever existed on the face of planet Earth, and anything that interferes with market fundamentalism or the privatization and commodification of all production and services should be vehemently opposed.

4b. All socialism (even common sense public programs and services that have no realistic profit incentive and can more effectively be provided on a governmental scale) must be aggressively countered at every turn, and

even made to appear as though such efforts are Big Bad Federal Overreach taking away personal freedoms, coercing compliance with the threat of State violence, and robbing hard-working Americans through the wanton theft of taxes.

5a. Traditional Judeo-Christian values – and particularly those that source primarily in white, Anglo European culture – around family structure, work ethics, and heteronormative gender roles, have been most responsible for creating a strong, thriving, exceptional America.

5b. Liberal ideas regarding gender fluidity and more open sexuality, women's equal rights and roles, inclusion of minorities and expanding their rights and status in society, social safety nets, worker's rights and protections, and a host of other social justice and progressive cultural considerations are therefore responsible for ruining American exceptionalism, and continue to erode America's potential for greatness.

6a. The propagation of corrosive liberal priorities, worldviews and knowledge has been accomplished mainly through entertainment media, mass media news outlets, public education, and the funding of scientific research on topics that benefit a progressive agenda.

6b. Therefore, the most effective ways to combat that corrosive influence are to a) establish mass media outlets that conform all information and public discourse to a conservative worldview; b) attack, discredit and defund all scientific research that could impede a conservative agenda or contradict a conservative worldview; and c) aggressively privatize education so that more control can be exercised over maintaining conservative curricula that reinforce right-leaning belief systems.

7a. Commercialistic consumerism – along with its attendant economic materialism and militant individualism – are necessary, even vaunted components of modern capitalistic society. They sustain growth-dependent capitalism through innovation and consumer demand, and are perfectly acceptable components of a thriving Western culture.

7b. To perpetuate commercialistic consumerism, it is also perfectly acceptable to sell products and services that consumers don't need – that is, to create artificial demand in a steady stream of variations and innovations – even if this requires the use of deceptive manipulation, coercion, or the incurring of massive personal debt to attract new consumers; or, indeed, utilizes exploitation, risks to consumers, excessive pollution or exhaustion of natural resources to create these new products. After all, *caveat emptor* is the only ethical standard of commercialistic consumerism, and the juggernaut of industrialized growth must not be slowed or stalled.

8a. Winning elections – and thereby shaping public policy, national and local legislation, the ideology of the Supreme Court, looser regulations for business, and enacting both lower tax rates for the wealthy and higher subsidies for corporations – is more important than honoring democratic processes or supporting enduring civic institutions.

8b. Therefore, *nothing is out-of-bounds* while achieve electoral wins, including gerrymandering, voter disenfranchisement, conspiracies about fraudulent votes, disrupting vote counts, seeking remedy in the courts for unwanted outcomes, high-profile smear campaigns, hacking voting machines, spreading false news in social media, engineering what I've described as "virtual causality" to constrain all information to a chosen narrative, and enlisting the aid of foreign governments to win elections.

There are many more core beliefs and value judgements on the Right, but these are some of the fundamentals. And, for many decades now, most of these agenda items have been doggedly pursued and propagated. To their credit, conservatives have been wildly successful in promoting their narrative and priorities – and degrading or defeating progressive policies, programs and politics that would otherwise rein in some of the more destructive elements. There is little more persuasive proof of this success than the fact that Republican voters nationwide are in the minority, but Republican candidates nevertheless hold majorities in the state and federal legislatures…as well as the White House of course. It's a truly stunning victory.

But an additional challenge for the Right, in the context of this paper, is that many of the assumptions that drive Right-wing politics and policy are factually and decisively false. Of the 16 points listed above, only a handful accurately describe or explain a given sociopolitical dynamic or economic reality, address the real causal factors for the challenges they frame, or are really as successful or sustainable as conservatives believe (I discuss these in more detail among my other writings: see Neoliberalism, The Case Against Capitalism, Reframing Profit, Integral Liberty). This means that, over and above the issue of abdicated agency, the Right is actively, willfully and *very effectively* distorting available evidence to conform to its worldview. This makes finding common ground extremely difficult, because these distortions have become extreme enough that, eventually, it has been impossible to reconcile them with fairly objective, settled facts. Listening to any of the Right-wing standard bearers in the U.S. is to hear constantly repeated irrational conflations, invented accusations, cognitive errors and logical fallacies, irrational skepticism, revisionist histories, and unapologetically bald-faced lies. And, consequently, there is no sure way of reaching a compromise position when the ground underfoot is constantly shifting according to the latest talk show whims, sensational journalism, biased research, or baseless Presidential tweets.

Further, in a context of abdicated agency and self-victimization, Republican rank-and-file have been completely hoodwinked into perpetuating and supporting the tenets of this misinformed ideology, an ideology that has ultimately had a disastrous impact on their lives – and indeed the lives of everyone and everything else on our planet. Particularly in the case of commercialistic consumerism, the ability to effectively address the greatest demands of our times is almost entirely undermined by this ideology. Take the Republican approach to healthcare, inclusive of the mental health treatment crisis described in the last section. Republicans have repeatedly attempted to craft a healthcare solution grounded in the principles of growth-dependent capitalism. But they simply haven't been able to offer any concrete solutions, preferring instead to rail against Obamacare as if it were a socialistic conspiracy (most of its major elements were initially proposed by the conservative Heritage Foundation, just to be clear, who had already taken credit for the RomneyCare in Massachusetts upon which Obamacare was modeled). And why can't Republicans come up with a solution*? Because they refuse to accept the reality that the profit motive and markets do not solve all societal problems efficiently*. This would undermine many of the Right's core tenets.

But medicine in the U.S. is a classic example of what happens when complex, high-cost systems attempt to capitalize on suffering – in this case, to make money off of sick people. Such objectives always create cascading perverse incentives that inflate healthcare costs, as well as perpetuating illnesses by mainly treating symptoms rather than causes. Why would any for-profit company invest in short-term, low-cost, low-profit preventative treatments that could eliminate chronic illnesses altogether, when they can instead create high-profit, symptom-alleviating, long-term treatments for chronic illnesses that can persist for a lifetime? Add to this an intermediary administrative system that is also for-profit (i.e. insurance companies), and of course you end up with skyrocketing healthcare costs. It's a no-brainer. But market fundamentalist conservatives *cannot admit this* without giving up some of their core ideological ideals. So Obamacare has not yet been repealed…just horribly crippled by Republican legislatures, so that it will appear to have failed in its objectives (to wit, most Democratic states with their own healthcare exchanges and Obamacare-supportive legislatures have lower premium increases, and many more plans available, than Republican states who have resisted participation, do not have their own exchanges, refused Medicare expansion for the poor, and worked hard to sabotage Obamacare at every turn). The situation is a powerful illustration of what I describe as "causal forcing" (see virtual causality).

In other words, because of the Right's foundational commitment to commercialistic consumerism and growth-dependent capitalism, market fundamentalists cannot allow alternative solutions to flourish – even though there is ample evidence of such flourishing in other advanced, more socialized economies (universal healthcare works quite well in many developed countries…but again, such factual evidence has not been allowed into the U.S. debate). And, to reiterate, maintaining child-like dependence from consumers encourages them to continue to externalize and abdicate their agency and perceive themselves to be helpless victims. Even if this means becoming toddlerized, unhealthy,

misinformed, angry addicts…as long as conspicuous consumption can maintain its breathtaking pace, Republicans seem content to let markets dictate results that are extraordinarily antagonistic to human flourishing.

Healthcare is of course just one example, but the same ideological flaws create similar, cascading impacts across many concerns of modern society. Gun control legislation impacts the profits of gun manufacturers, so their lobbyists spend millions ensuring gun control bills don't pass, and that gun control advocates don't get elected. For-profit prisons lobby against criminal justice reform. Insurance companies lobby against universal healthcare. Municipal minimum wage laws are defeated – despite support from local businesses, Chambers of Commerce, communities, and elected officials – because they threaten the profits of large corporations operating in those towns. A primary purpose of organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council or the Republican Attorneys General Association is to make sure that Republican AGs and legislatures remain in rigid compliance with the overarching objectives of commercialistic corporatocracy. It's really an astonishingly transparent self-serving agenda. And of course many Democrats have often played a similar game in order to fund their campaigns as well – while, in certain instances, the grass roots support of candidates like Bernie Sanders or Barack Obama have intermittently overwhelmed traditional corporate backing, illustrating the potential power of an awakened electorate.

It would appear, therefore, that these extraordinary cognitive distortions and self-serving corporate agendas must somehow be relinquished by the Right in order for any Left/Right dialogue move forward, and complex problems to actually be solved. As alluded to earlier, we will likely need to substantially abandon Left vs. Right dualism in order to move forward at all. The lack of willingness to do this, or to examine truth itself, is a byproduct of a deeper disinterest driven by an essentially broken, outdated ideology full of self-defeating contradictions. However, is it possible that fully restoring a sense of personal and collective agency to Republican voters will help them find their way to more accurate truths? To arrive at more balanced and verifiable valuations? To explore evidence-based approaches that will themselves erode the false narratives, assumptions, propaganda and spin that have so egregiously annihilated a sustainable way forward…? This brings us back to the issue of waking up, of seeing how our agency has been relinquished, and how our self-victimization has paralyzed our individual and collective will.

Perhaps this is a chicken-and-egg sort of question. Or perhaps both personal agency, flawed emotional reasoning, and a more sophisticated navigation and understanding of knowledge must all be healed simultaneously – across all of the sociopolitical spectrum. If we begin to pry apart the falsehoods from the victimhood, while at the same time restoring agency, self-reliance and critical thinking skills, isn't it possible that everyone involved will be able to self-liberate, without further interference? I think that is my hope, my aim in writing this paper, and my motivation for offering Level 7 solutions.

Summary of Proposed Evolution

To conclude, then, here is a summary bullet-list of concerns that could be concurrently addressed for greatest benefit:

1. Reversing the all-encompassing trend of debilitating abdication of agency and adoption of a victim-identity, thereby restoring collective deliberation and self-determination.

2. Encouraging self-reliance and self-advocacy regarding responsibility for our well-being and flourishing, while at the same time providing frictionless access to resources for this adventure.

3. Synchronizing and harmonizing accurate knowledge methodologies and sources – particularly about evidence-based solutions – across all political ideologies and belief systems.

4. Eliminating the influence of corporate wealth and self-serving agendas on both the political process, and on news and information streams.

5. Relaxing commercialistic consumerism and market-based solutions as a de facto standard for all problem solving, recognizing that there are other excellent avenues to solutions that do not involve the profit motive.

6. Evaluating and collecting data according to modes of personal-social agency, so that all collective decisions, and codification of those decisions in law, can be understood in that context.

7. Encouraging critical, self-reflective thinking, along with vigorous dialogue among competing perspectives.

8. Ultimately, aiming to attenuate Left/Right distinctions in analysis, language and dialogue around complex issues, and instead plotting them within a continuum of more nuanced and descriptive variables.

How can we effectively arrive at such solutions and sustain them over time?   That likely needs to be a separate, broader discussion, and is what some of the proposed steps toward a Level-7 political economy seek to address. You can read about those steps here: L7 Action Guide. I also offer a brief sampling of conceptual pilots in the Afterthoughts section of this essay. For now, however, we have cobbled together a starting point – a straightforward groundwork – for assessing our political discourse and examining some of the flaws in U.S. politics and culture. Even if readers don't agree with this approach, my hope is that at least some of the considerations here can be reflected upon, and that we can all proceed together with a modicum less denial.

Afterthoughts – The Willful Devil in the Missing Details

First, it seems reasonable that the metrics for the modes of agency should be more carefully quantified in ongoing research for many issues, and across multiple disciplines. This could be quite useful when legislating new laws or evaluating existing ones, in developing public policy and measuring its impact, in piloting new systems, tuning up existing institutions, and so forth. There can be a way forward using evidence-based approaches once ideological bias has been relaxed. Below is a representation of the speculative data in the murder matrix example. Wouldn't it be great to have some *actual* data for this…?

"Murder is Wrong" (Spectrum of Personal-Social Agency)
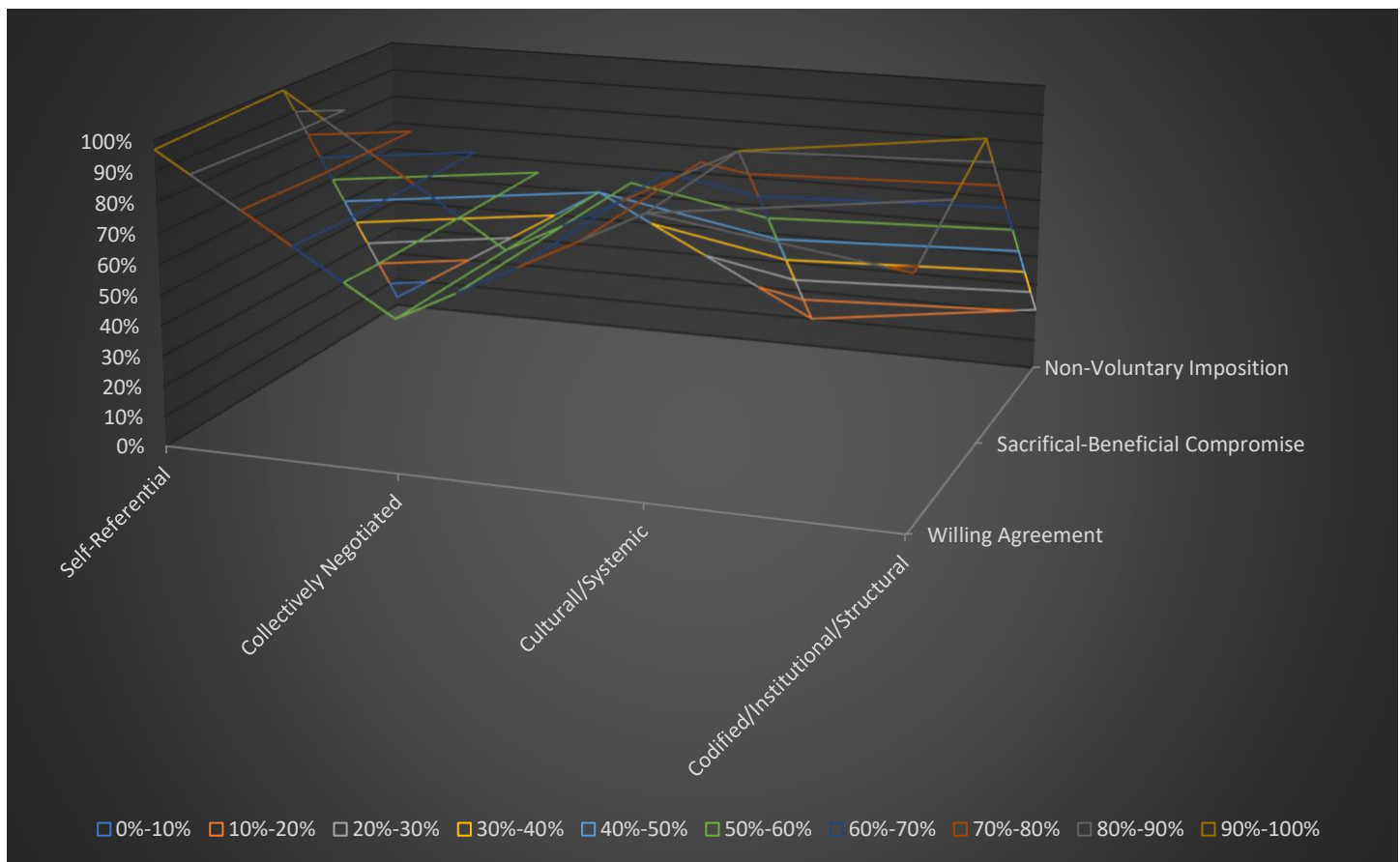
Second, it might be useful to return to some of the more granular contexts following the "murder matrix," ruminate over some evidenced-based solutions, and consider how these might play out within both current landscape – and then in the target conditions proposed in the summary of evolution.

For the gang member in a poor neighborhood, a fear of incarceration cannot mitigate the much more immediate fear of personal retaliation or the targeting of family members. The viewpoint that more vigorous policing or harsher punishments for certain communities will lead to attenuating crime levels in those communities is simply not supported by any historical evidence. The cultural dynamics involved override the assumptions made by the escalating rule of law. Once again, it may *feel comforting* to ratchet up stricter law enforcement, but it just isn't very effective. So what has been effective? Most evidence collected from various studies[22,23] and experiments in the U.S. and around the world show that there is a fairly straightforward formula for reducing risk factors for criminal gang activity and violence:

1. Keep youth in school: end harsh punitive measures for kids acting out in the classroom, and instead train staff and teachers how to deescalate conflict and manage disruptive behavior.
2. Invite parents directly to work with trained resources on strengthening family relationships and stability, providing therapy resources and financial resources for families in crisis.
3. Provide frictionless access to mental health support and substance misuse counselling and prevention resources.
4. Initiate community programs for young men that engage them productively in society, and offer them a) an alternative route out of poverty, b) a means of engaging with other young men and older male mentors in socially constructive ways, and c) supervised access to positive environments and activities after school and at night.
5. Combine education about gang intervention, risk factors and resistance strategies within all of the aforementioned strategies.

Those are some of the well-known basics, but I would go further to address some of the deeper structural issues as well:

6. Encourage intercultural reconciliation that erodes the prejudices and perceived divides between different classes and ethnic groups, and do so across many different disciplines and institutions: in education, housing policies, urban development, community development, workplaces, etc.
7. Legalize illicit drugs and regulate them. Remove the profit motive incentive from the grip of organized crime, and shift it into legal business activity.
8. Make gun ownership and acquisition much more difficult by regulating the supply side of the equation (see next example regarding *home defense*).
9. Reform the criminal justice system – laws, law enforcement, and incarceration itself – to end the disproportionate incarceration of poor minorities, and the criminalization of entire generations by non-rehabilitative for-profit prisons.

Further, such efforts do need to be effectively universal in scope – simply changing some variables locally isn't likely to have the desired effect. For example, marijuana has been legalized in some U.S. states, but remains illegal in other states. This means that legal growers now make a fraction of the profit that growers who are still selling product illegally make, which effectively punishes the law-abiding business owners. Access to guns likewise has to be more uniformly regulated – one reason why gun control measures were so successful in reducing gun violence in Australia was because they were national rather than local.[24] And, not surprisingly, once the measures became less uniform over time in Australia, the risks began to increase again, until another mass shooting – the first in over twenty years – did happen again.[25,26] Regardless, these are not controversial observations: some combination of the programs above will undoubtedly be effective in reducing drug-related violence, gun violence, and gang violence.

So where is the challenge? The challenge is that folks on both the Left and the Right are reticent to commit to any or all of these steps, though sometimes for what appear on the surface to be different reasons. Below the surface, however, is that pattern alluded to earlier: knee-jerk black-and-white reasoning that veers away from proven solutions into comforting binary tropes. The Right won't tolerate any gun control. The Left seems to waffle on criminal justice reform. Both the Right and the Left invoke NIMBY arguments for community at-risk youth programs, intercultural activities, racial integration, or rehabilitative facilities that might negatively impact their property values, or are perceived to have an adverse influence their children. And although there has been recent positive movement regarding drug legalization among both groups, the ongoing difficulty of passing effective legalization laws has evidenced that this concept is hard to swallow for many on both the Left and the Right – especially in light of potential conflict with federal drug laws (that uniformity issue again). So there are folks on both sides who desire a particular outcome (i.e. less criminal gang activity, illegal drug activity, and lethal violence), but who simply do not wish to let go of their cherished ideals of "how things should be" in order to make it happen.

Adding to this situation, there is of course a political dynamic where elected officials are clearly more afraid of losing the next election and/or support from a few wealthy donors than of endangering democracy and the Republic itself, and where the outcome of elections are determined by massive propaganda campaigns funded and coordinated by, once again, a relatively small number of wealthy donors. The central theme being that huge amounts of money are called upon to shape the outcomes of every vote, and the sources of money usually coincide with whose profits, wealth or influence will be most impacted by a shift in public policy. And all of this routinely results in louder polemics, greater polarization, and more black-and-white positions on every topic under consideration…in order to package, sell and spin *every political issue* to garner the required support. It's a lowest-common-denominator marketing campaign for morality itself, with the predictable consequence being that voters and candidates alike begin acting more like willful children – or, in some instances, unreasoning animals – than thoughtful participants in democracy.

But let's return to another example: **the person who wants to defend their family during a home invasion.** Let's say Bob enjoys the privilege of owning a gun. And let's also assume that his reasons for this have nothing to do with Second Amendment rights. In this instance, Bob primary justification is a strong protective urge regarding his family. Crime rates have increased in his neighborhood, and funding and staffing levels for local law enforcement have dropped precipitously because of tax cuts, leading to slower response times. Bob sincerely believes that he and his gun may be the only thing between his family and violent criminals. But Bob has never registered his gun with local authorities. In fact, until a recent popular initiative (backed by Left-leaning folks) changed the laws regarding this, there was no requirement to register his gun. Then one night it actually happens: Bob's home is broken into, and he shoots the intruder. And guess what? Bob goes to jail for unlawful possession of a firearm. So, in this case, Left-leaning zeal for gun control has criminalized a formerly lawful act of self-defense, by someone who had previously had lawful ownership of a firearm.

But were Bob's actions willfully unlawful? Or did he simply feel the new law overreached into the privacy of his home, requiring him to divulge his gun ownership in a public way? Once again, a knee-jerk, black-and-white approach to solving a complex issue has resulted in unintended – and/or ineffective – consequences. So how about a different approach? Instead of penalizing gun owners who are not criminals, how about trying these ideas out, remembering the lessons of Australia's success story:

1. As there is already a higher concentration of firearms in the U.S. than anywhere else in the world[27] – in fact there are likely more guns than people in the United States[28] – how about banning the production and importation of firearms for domestic use for a period of five years.
2. At the same time, initiate a nation-wide buyback program like the one in Australia that destroys the acquired firearms, and leave that buyback in place for the same five-year period.
3. Likewise, when any weapons are confiscated by police for being used in a criminal act, those too would be destroyed.
4. Initiate a universal background check that keeps criminals, individuals with a restraining order or history of violence, and mentally unstable persons from acquiring firearms.
5. Promote innovation of non-lethal defense technologies that can replace guns altogether.
6. Otherwise, allow everyone who has a gun to keep it if they want, to buy ammunition, to shoot for recreation, and to enjoy owning a gun for the protection of their family.

As you can see, such proposals are not incompatible with the proposals outlined in the previous gang violence issue. In fact, if these proposals function like similar ones have in other parts of the world, then their outcome will ultimately be

that Bob no longer feels he must own a firearm to defend his family. Why? Well, because, in conjunction with criminal gang activity mitigation, drug legalization, and gun violence reduction, Bob will have less violent crime in his neighborhood, there will be fewer gun-related deaths across all sectors of society, and non-lethal options for self-defense will become widely available. But would such proposals be acceptable to both the Left and the Right ends of the political spectrum? Not in the current climate, no. The knee-jerk reactivity of the Left is powerfully triggered by anything that smacks of firearm permissiveness, and the Right is likewise triggered by anything that feels like a firearm restriction. And yet, just as with gang violence, this is an arena of collective agreement and constructive discourse that could – if "how things should be" ideals can be set aside for the briefest of moments – result in pragmatic compromise.

Here again, however, there is a lot of money involved (politically) in keeping a steady stream of guns available for the American public, and keeping gun manufacturers in business as the military shifts away from boots-on-the-ground, firearm-centric operations to much more sophisticated forms of warfare. The writing has been on the wall for gun makers for many years in this regard. And so much of the gun makers' profits are spent garnering fear among American consumers either that their guns will soon be taken away, or that escalating racial tensions would soon be visited upon their communities, or that they would soon need to defend themselves from a violent Leftist revolution…and so on.[29,30] So proposals like the ones just enumerated will not be popular with gun manufacturers – just like the proposals for criminal justice reform are not popular with private prisons, climate science is not popular with the oil and gas industry, regulation of bee-killing pesticides is not at all popular with the producers of those pesticides, a universal public healthcare option is not popular with health insurance companies, and so on *ad nauseum*. The extraordinary propaganda from such sources is relentless, voluminous, pervasive…and effective. And so we again arrive at a major causal actor in the routine distortions of political discourse and attempts to find common ground: concerns about corporate profits, and the extraordinary influence of concentrated wealth on the U.S. political system. It seems obvious that insulating politics from such wealth concentrations is incredibly important – something that the Supreme Court's recent rulings regarding campaign contributions have utterly failed to recognize.

Which leads us to assessing the practicality of the gang violence and gun laws proposals in the wake of a true awakening of U.S. citizens. If Americans are thinking clearly, are not being hoodwinked and manipulated by plutocrats, have taken responsibility for their own well-being and education about the facts from credible sources, decide to enter deliberations and pilot efforts with an open mind, commit to resisting the urge to abdicate their own agency and become helpless victims, and take a sincere and regular interest in their political obligations to civil society…well, what's to stop these ideas from bearing fruit? Even if that fruit is "Hey, that T.Collins Logan is a real idiot, and has no idea how to fix these problems!" it will still have served the helpful function of excluding an idiot's insights from future deliberations.

Please note: some footnotes are duplicated to simplify shifting number sequences of references in the text.

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