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The Lost Art of Cooperation

In exalting competition, Americans often forget that cooperation and collective effort are the foundation of freedom.

BY BENJAMIN R. BARBER

Government and co-operation are in all things the laws of life; anarchy and competition the laws of death.

—John Ruskin, *Unto This Last* (1862)

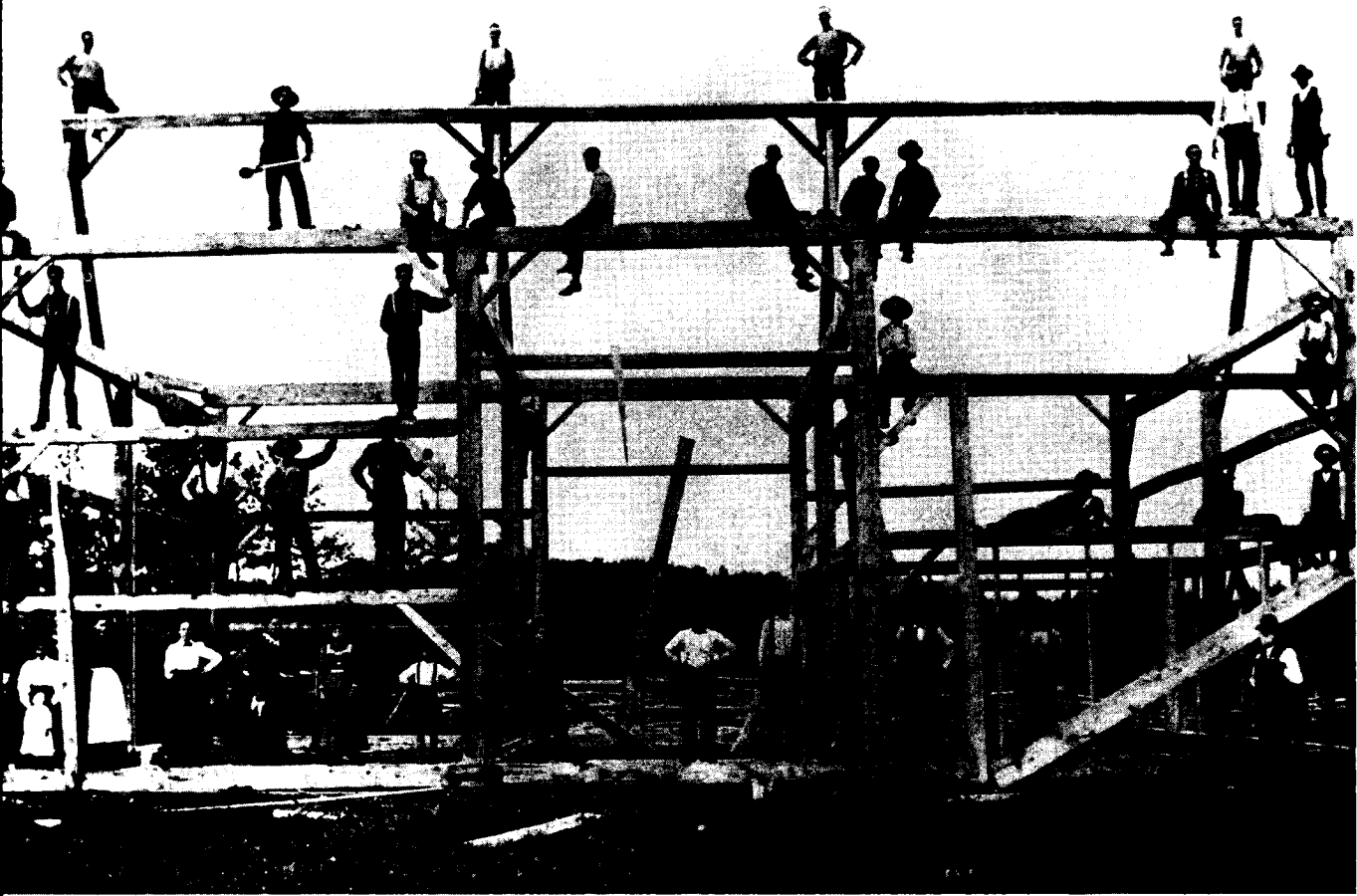
COMPETITION IS AS AMERICAN AS APPLE PIE. IT announces American individualism and marks the American market economy with its characteristic rivalries. Not just for neoliberals such as Milton Friedman and quasi-anarchists such as philosopher Robert Nozick, but for Americans of all political stripes, it reflects a distrust of the “government and co-operation” dear to cultural critic John Ruskin. We are a nation of winners (and, yes, losers) where, in the wonderfully perverse turn of phrase often attributed to one of America’s “winningest” coaches, “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.”

Yet we need not be readers of Ruskin to know that competition also has a pejorative sense, even in

American usage. It may be nature’s way, as Charles Darwin proposed, but only when we conceive of nature as a jungle. Whatever we make of it, today competition dominates our ideology, shapes our cultural attitudes, and sanctifies our market economy as never before. We are living in an age that prizes competition and demeans cooperation, an era more narcissistic than the Gilded Age, more hubristic than the age of Jackson. Competition rules.

We need only look at America’s favorite activities—sports, entertainment, and politics—to notice the distorting effect of the obsession with competition. Sports would seem to define competition, as competition defines sports. But beginning with the ancient Olympics, sports have also been about performance, about excelling (hence, excellence), and about the cultivation of athletic virtue. It is not victory but a “personal best” that counts. In the United States, however, athletics is about beating others. About how one performs *in comparison* with others. Ancient and modern philosophers alike associate comparison with pride and vanity (*amour-propre*), and have shown how vanity corrupts virtue and excellence. When Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar protests, “Such

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Minnesotans raise a barn for a neighbor circa 1900. Competition may be as American as apple pie, but so is cooperation.

men as he be never at heart's ease/While they behold a greater than themselves," he captures what has become the chief hazard of a hyper-competitive culture. No wonder ours is often an outer-directed culture, unreflective, grasping, aggressive, and cutthroat.

It is, ironically, a culture that tries to pin on the animal world responsibility for human viciousness. Michael Vick, one of our great gladiatorial football competitors, recently admitted to sponsoring brutal dogfights. The real dogfights, of course, are the football games he played in, where injury and even death are not unavoidable costs but covertly attractive features of the sport. Where steroid use is forgivable, or at least understandable, on the way to a winning record. And where dogfighting itself

(like bullfighting and cockfighting) is justified by an appeal to the "laws of nature," though it is men who articulate those laws to rationalize their own warlike disposition.

It is much the same with entertainment. Our most successful shows, themselves in a competition for survival with one another (sweeps week!), pit on-camera competitors against one another in contests only one can win. The eponymous show *Survivor* is the Darwinian prototype, but the principle rules on all the "reality" shows. On *American Idol*, singing is the excuse but winning the real aim. In the winners' world of television, nothing is what it seems. *Top Chef* is not about excellence or variety in cooking, but about winning and losing. *Project Runway*

turns a pluralistic fashion industry that caters to many tastes into a race (with clocks and time limits) in which there is but one winner. The competitive culture hypes winners but is equally (more?) fascinated with losers. "It is not enough that I win," pro-

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claims the hubris-driven American competitor, "others must lose." And Americans have shown themselves ready to become big losers in order to be eligible to become big winners—however remote the odds. We are a nation of gamblers willing to tolerate radical income inequality and a large class of losers (into which we willingly risk being shunted) for the chance to win.

American politics too is founded on competition. Contrast electoral politics in our representative democracy with citizen politics in a participatory democracy, where the aim is not to win but to achieve common ground and secure public goods—a model of politics in which no one wins unless everyone wins, and a loss for some is seen as a loss for all. The very meanings of the terms "commonweal" and "the public interest" (the "res publica" from which our term "republic" is derived) suggest a system without losers. How different from this the American system has become. As each election rolls around, we complain that ideas and policy are shoved to the background and personality and the horse race it engenders are placed front and center.

What's gone wrong here? Why, as a nation, are we so obsessed with competition, so indifferent to cooperation? For starters, competition really *is* as American as apple pie. Amer-

ica has always been deeply individualistic, and individualism has presumed the insularity and autonomy of persons and, thus, a natural rivalry among them. Capitalism also embraces competition as its animus, and America is nothing if not capitalistic. Even

the American understanding of democracy, which emphasizes representation and the collision of interests, puts the focus on division and partisanship. There are, of course, democratic alternatives. Systems of proportional representation, for example, aim to ensure fair representa-

tion of all parties and views no matter how numerous. But our system, with its single-member districts and "first past the post" elections, is winner take all and damn the hindmost, a setup in which winners govern while losers look balefully on, preparing themselves for the next battle.

This has never been more so than in this era when politics has, in Jonathan Chait's recent portrait in *The New Republic*, become "an atavistic clash of partisan willpower," with Christian Right pitted against the Net-roots Left in a polarized media environment defined by hyperbolic talk radio and the foolish excesses of the blogosphere. Moderation, cooperation, compromise, and bipartisanship are lame reflections of a pusillanimous past and of a "pathetic and exhausted leadership" incapable of winning elections. Even more than the Founders, the new political crusaders of Left and Right prefer King Lear's version of politics—"who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out"—to the aspirations of communitarians and republicans who seek to establish a common good. Polarization is more an ideal than a pathology, and incivility is politics properly understood.

In recent decades, sustained by neoliberal economists such as Milton Friedman and the political successes of President Ronald Reagan and British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, this natural inclination toward individualism and competition has been reinforced not only by left/right Manichaeism, but by an ideology of privatization and anti-

government animus that characterizes cooperation as only an excuse for paternalistic bureaucracy and public corruption, while market competition, which strips government of its powers, putatively guarantees transparency and freedom. The most partisan politicians, upon winning, must govern in the name of all, using the powers of overweening government they have secured, so to hell with all politicians. The entrepreneur—whether a blogger or a hedge fund trader—can remain the eternal competitor and hero, active and free in the name of self-interest.

The extreme rhetoric aside, everywhere in America, liberty is deemed competition's ultimate rationale. More than anything else, our modern neoliberal ideology contends that competition and a culture of winners and losers assures us all our freedom. Like the corporate winners in the global marketplace and the political winners of the American electoral sweepstakes, even the ordinary winners on *Survivor* and its ilk are liberated from mundane constraints. No wonder American winners lose perspective and put themselves above sexual norms, above ordinary standards, above the law. By the same token, losing is a ticket to subservience, reminding us of the importance of winning and thrusting us back into the race, no matter how often we lose (think about the gambler's mentality).

Ruskin is turned on his head: Public government, community standards, and cooperation are seen as entailing the laws of inertia. They exonerate people from personal responsibility, and imprison them in circumstances and the victim mentality ("It's not my fault I lost"), the result being a kind of civic death. Private activity and competition, conversely, assure vitality, productivity, and responsibility—"I

made my own circumstances! I made myself a winner!" They are the very essence of life and liberty.

So what's wrong with this? Plenty. Competition skews the balance, and threatens real democracy. More fundamentally, it fails to comprehend freedom's true character. In the human balance, given that we are creatures of nature and artifice, of both rivalry and love, we normally live in parallel, mutually intersecting worlds of competition and cooperation, if not quite as grimly or definitively as Ruskin imagined. Competition may not be the law of death, but as the law of the marketplace and the radically individualistic people who populate it, it distorts and unhinges our common lives and slights the necessary role of cooperation and community in securing liberty. In construing ourselves exclusively as economic beings—what the old philosophers used to call *homo economicus*—we account for ourselves as producers and consumers but not as neighbors and citizens. We shortchange real liberty.



"Greed, for lack of a better word, is good," the fictional villain Gordon Gekko famously declared in *Wall Street* (1987). It's said that the film's depiction of brutal competition drew even more recruits to the real Wall Street.

Clearly we are more than economic beings, if only because we are more than merely material beings. Cooperation, although it is hardly the only law of life, has long been a complementary principle of community and civic living. That is to say, there are two models, not just one, for the human project: We can conceive of ourselves as economic particles in constant collision in a material marketplace, and hence can equate flourishing with robust competition, or we can conceive of ourselves as civic beings embedded in communities, who thrive on cooperation. We can be uncivil antagonists playing king of the mountain or common stakeholders in mutual goods. There are social conditions that permit both of these sides of our nature to prosper, if usually in some productive tension with one another.

That tension is hard to maintain, however. The two modes of being inevitably become the source of rival theories of politics and society and, as a consequence, two distinctive approaches to human identity. When we contemplate nature as a kind of parody of human warfare and anarchy, as Thomas Hobbes did, our social existence becomes a "war of all against all." According to this model, we live in a "zero-sum" world where one man's victory must be another man's defeat. We either have to sacrifice our liberty to secure tranquility or live well through rivalry and conquest. The price of attenuating competition is always high, even when it is deemed necessary for survival (as posited by social contract theory). In our very impetus to move, this view argues, we cannot help but collide with others. In collision, we cannot help but experience others as limits on our own freedom. The preservation of freedom demands competition, while any restraint at all on competition, even mere civility, becomes an unfortunate limit on liberty.

This celebration of radical competition has, of course, been contested by theorists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Jefferson, and John Dewey, who have treated competition more as a problem or pathology to be overcome than an ideal to be realized. In the cooperative paradigm, the world is understood to be a non-zero-sum game in which we can win by helping others win. We are psychic as well as material beings and can coexist in common space with similar beings, even become

stronger by doing so. Mutual aid and common ground are extensions of our common being and make possible healthy and sustainable lives. Freedom becomes a feature of our cooperative interaction with others rather than a symbol of our rivalry with or independence of them. We are free not when unconstrained but under constraints and norms we choose for ourselves. And we are free together, not alone.

While Darwin famously saw evolution as an exercise in species-enhancing competition, the Russian thinker Peter Kropotkin insisted that it was an exercise in cooperation. In *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902), he argued that survival was fostered by cooperation within and among species rather than by murderous rivalries. Similar arguments can be found among evolutionary biologists and social scientists today, as Robert Wright shows in *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* (2000). The communitarian paradigm offers a portrait of humans as naturally embedded in communities. Here, the political project is one of individuation: creating artificially the conditions for personal freedom from a cooperative democratic process. In this view, democracy is not a product of freedom, freedom is a product of democracy. Democratic societies do not secure cooperation by sacrificing freedom, they create conditions for freedom by associating us in cooperative communities.

Let us apply this short lesson in political theory to the American experience. In the American ideal of "liberal democracy," the two tendencies embodied in this term are supposed to stand in a healthy tension. The "liberal" part of our culture is individualistic and competitive, focused on private freedom and property; the "democratic" part is communitarian and cooperative, focused on public freedom (civic freedom), justice, and the common ground that makes private property possible. Today, the liberal element dominates the democratic communitarian element, upsetting the delicate balance.

The American people have always had a healthy distrust of power, especially in its European hyper-collectivist incarnation (the Nazis and the Commu-

nists), in which an ideal quest for community and equality becomes an excuse for rampant despotism. But in allowing this understandable caution to morph into a distrust of democratic centralized government and community power *tout court*, Americans turned a seemingly innocent concern with social justice (welfare government, the safety net society, and a politics of cooperation, for example) into totalitarian vices.

From the start, democracy itself has bred a certain anxiety in America, an anxiety for which Alexis de Tocqueville wrote the defining text. He predicted the formation of a rights-crushing majoritarian tyranny. Yet the specter of majorities run amok that has helped rationalize market neoliberalism and privatization, and has justified advancing the interests of capitalism before establishing civic democracy in places such as Iraq and Russia, has exacted a high cost. For collectivism has never been an American issue. The United States has always been a rights-encased, decentralized, federalist "weak-state" system, relatively impervious to the kinds of dogmatic statism that wrecked Europe in the last century. As my favorite Harvard teacher, Louis Hartz, liked to point out in calling for a more democratic culture, "The American majority has forever been a puppy dog tethered to a lion's leash." The new obsession with competition and market liberty constructs an illusory enemy—the supposedly overweening democratic state. The quest for equality and justice is caricatured as a striving for mediocrity and bureaucratic irresponsibility.

At the same time, the actual character of the competitive marketplace is badly misjudged. For the irony is that the rhetoric of market competition often masks private monopolies: less choice, not more. Democratic realists and impartial sociologists recognize that behind the façade of boastful competition lies a world of inequality and domination. While praising the competitive market, those who actually work the marketplace specialize in mergers and

acquisitions, takeovers and cartels, liquidations and selloffs. Wealth is not produced, but reshuffled and expropriated. Real competition is avoided, and the risk in whose name profit is supposedly earned is socialized (the taxpayers bail out the corporate failures), while profits, though no longer earned by tak-

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ing real risks, are kept private, reserved for shareholders and overpaid corporate managers. Deregulation is said to enhance competition, but in the airline and communication industries it has entrenched price fixing and facilitated cartels and the kinds of monopoly that "bundling" makes possible, as when Bill Gates forced computer companies to include the whole Microsoft software platform in the machines they sold.

This is not to say that competition is just a ruse. While it may fail to actually define the corporate hierarchies that masquerade as a market economy, it dominates American cultural life and pervades our psyches. It manages to twist our social interactions and pervert our sense of commonality. Most damagingly, perhaps, its relentless rhetoric—now integral to the vast marketing industry—persuades us that our most precious value, freedom, is tied up with privacy and dependent on freedom *from* democratic governance, whereas it is democratic governance that actually enforces the variety and pluralism the market putatively reflects and reinforces. Government marks the rule of law, and it is law that secures the conditions for freedom.

John Ruskin had the thing right: As an enemy rather than an ally of true freedom, competition is not our friend. To live and to flourish, it is the lost art of cooperation that we need to cultivate. ■