

THE MORAL BASIS OF A BACKWARD SOCIETY

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Most cultures throughout history have been terrible. The natural state of so-called civilized man is somewhere between today's Venezuela and today's Somalia. Large-scale success, exceptions to the general rule, offering long-term stability combined with some degree of flourishing, has been limited to a handful of cultures. If you add actual accomplishment that advances the whole human race, you are left with only three, the Greeks, the Romans, and Christendom—which three, no surprise, are closely linked in history and in attributes. None of this is news, although it is denied by the malicious clowns now temporarily in charge of public discourse.

But why are most cultures in history terrible? Asked this question, most people would point to a culture's ruling class, painting it as extractive, oppressive, arbitrary, and so forth. Certainly this is often part of the problem, but what is lost in such an analysis is that the culture of a society is equally, or more, determined by the masses. True, the masses are irrelevant to the chosen history of a culture, which is determined only by the ruling classes, but they are not therefore irrelevant to its history. Bad culture at the bottom means, in most cases, no success at the top, and ultimate failure of a civilization. Even a superb ruling class cannot make a culture flourish if the raw material of the society is defective. This book, Edward Banfield's *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, illustrates this principle in microcosm in 1950s Italy.

Banfield was an American political scientist. He began his career as a New Deal functionary, but actual experience of government "helping" made him skeptical that funneling cash to the poor actually improved their lives, and he turned to academic analysis of the culture of poverty. In the past month, his most famous work, *The Unheavenly City: The Nature and the Future of Our Urban Crisis*, has received new interest. That 1970 book attacked Great Society policies as failures, analyzed the differences between urban classes, and became part of the underpinning of "broken windows" policing. Banfield made his reputation earlier, however, with this 1958 book, studying not America, but the culture of a small southern Italian village.

The Moral Basis of a Backward Society is a social science analysis of a village Banfield calls Montegrano, but which is really Chiaromonte. Then as now, Montegrano was built on top of a modest mountain, surrounded by small plots of land. Most of the village's residents, about seventy percent, earned their living by farming. Some were landless laborers; the majority worked tiny scattered plots of land (scattered in part because of inheritance and dowry, but also because the peasants liked it that way, since, for example, a hailstorm would probably not wipe out their entire crop). Yields were low, since the land was dry, artificial irrigation lacking, and fertilizer use rare. Most of the peasants, except those with outlying farms (who tended to have larger farms and be a little more well-off), lived in one-room or two-room homes in town, and walked to their plots every day they farmed. Sometimes they were able to supplement their income with wage work, either for a larger landowner or for the state, but this was only occasional and could not be relied upon. In other words, this was, for those who worked the land, a subsistence existence.

For the other thirty percent of the villagers, such as blacksmiths or merchants, existence was slightly above subsistence, but not comfortable. Even the handful of socially superior villagers, such as state bureaucrats, professionals such as the one doctor or the one lawyer, or the gentry who owned modest holdings, were far from wealthy. They were higher in social status because they did not work with their hands, but shared many of the economic concerns of the peasants, as well as, crucially, most of their social outlook.

Montegrano, although it lay within (long) walking distance of similar towns, was fundamentally isolated. No newspapers were published. More relevantly for Banfield's analysis, no charitable endeavors of any kind existed, and no coordinated action for improvements ever occurred. In Banfield's term, there was no public spirit and no "political capacity"—that is, no ability to organize to achieve any community goal of any kind, even a private but long-term business goal. There was no religious spirit, either; the peasants were mostly either indifferent or anti-clerical, and the few devout were superstitious and ignorant of basic religious doctrine. For example, they assumed that God had a relationship with the saints similar to theirs with their neighbors—one full of suspicion and dominated by the fear that the neighbors were getting

one over on them. To the extent any benefit might accrue to the town, such as road improvements or an ambulance service, it could only be provided by the Italian state. No villager would ever lift a finger to even request such a thing as an individual, much less collectively. If some benefit arrived, it arrived in the same way as rain—unexpected and not tied to any effort of the villagers.

Banfield documented the perspectives of the villagers using a variety of social science tools, such as surveys and tests that asked villagers to make up a story when shown a picture card or a blank card (the “Thematic Apperception Test”). The results were pretty horrifying. In short, he discovered that with no exceptions, the villagers cared for nobody at all outside the nuclear family, and their time horizon was limited to the immediate future. Coupled with this was a constant bone-deep pessimism and fear, both of losing social status and of losing the necessities of life and thereby becoming a beggar. Banfield concluded the obvious—the villagers lacked political capacity because their culture made it impossible.

Why was it this way, given that the end result for the people was much worse than if some collective action could have been undertaken? Banfield attempted to answer this question, but first listed “usual explanations” for the incapacities that plagued Montegrano, rejecting them as inadequate, and only then offering, and supporting, his alternative explanation. Yes, the people were desperately poor—but they had plenty of time, vast amounts of time given the modest demands of their farming, that they could have devoted to collective action. Instead, they chose to loaf. Yes, the people were uneducated—but they were neither stupid nor ignorant, and usually gave thoughtful answers to any abstract question, and as Banfield pointed out, men and women on the American frontier were just as uneducated, yet their “capacity for self-government and mutual aid was nevertheless extraordinarily great.” Yes, the classes were divided—but there was no class antagonism to speak of, nor antagonism toward the state, so that could not explain political incapacity. Yes, the lower classes were fatalistic—but they were perfectly able to make decisions and take action when they deemed it necessary.

Banfield’s alternative explanation, rejecting the “usual explanations,” was that the culture of the villagers embodied what he called “amoral

familism,” a term he invented. By this, he meant their social decision-making criterion was to maximize short-term benefit to the nuclear family, that included only mother, father, and children, while ignoring long-term benefits (and costs) and any impact outside the nuclear family, including to the extended family. The result was that all the peasants were, in Banfield’s account, existentially miserable. This was not merely because they were always on the edge of disaster; such precariousness is common in many cultures. It is because they were atomized, unable to rely in any way on others, so they always lived on the edge. Yet rather than forming social webs to provide a safety net, they constantly viewed their neighbors with suspicion, aware that their neighbors returned the favor. Thus, Montegrano was filled with a “melancholy,” largely based in envy. Villagers had much in common with the Russian peasant who, granted a magical wish with the sole condition that his neighbor would get double whatever he asked for, requested he be blinded in one eye.

How did such a defective culture, that today would be called totally lacking in social capital, arise? Banfield ascribes this debilitating set of attitudes, tentatively, to a historically high death rate combined with no extended families (although this does not explain why there were no extended families, which Banfield notes were common in other areas of Italy not far distant). He only occasionally adverts to the past of Montegrano, and there are clues that amoral familism, envy, and melancholy were a function of modernity. Villagers in past generations, Banfield says, had less yet were apparently happier. They were embedded in a wider tangle of responsibilities, rather than being atomized. That amoral familism was new is also suggested by Banfield’s point that it could not exist for long without the outside agency of the state, since it would end in violence as feuds built and no resources from the outside smoothed over rough patches. Thus, Montegrano is not a proxy for Italian society, or even southern Italian society, of its time—it is a snapshot of a particular defective culture in practice, one that if it were universal, would collapse an entire society in short order.

A substantial element of financial pressure on villagers was the need to provide dowries for daughters, if they were to have an “acceptable” marriage, meaning one not to a man lower in the social scale. I have long wondered why some cultures, including most or all European cultures, insist on dowries, while other cultures have the opposite practice, “bride

price.” The usual explanation is that in cultures where agricultural labor by women is important, more important than portable property or capital, bride price is found. In other words, the husband is paying for the loss of the labor to the bride’s family. This capital-labor distinction is not entirely convincing, though, since bride price is also found in societies where agricultural labor by women is not important. Examined more closely, it’s evident that dowry is part of a larger complex of social rules in any society, tied to those governing inheritance and usually designed to protect members of the family from penury. Thus, although dowry is a burden for the bride’s family, and often seen as simply a matter of enriching the groom and his family, by those involved it is primarily seen as for the benefit of the bride, such that she can be certain to live an adequate lifestyle. This is reinforced by the often-related tradition of dower, money or property secured wholly to the bride, either by the groom or by the bride’s family, in order to protect her if the husband dies or abandons her. No doubt societies have other reasons, some not evident, why they pick a particular pattern. As with most social practices, on the principle of *Chesterton’s Fence*, we should initially presume that what is done in a particular area has coherent reasons behind it. Though, to be sure, as shown by amoral familism, this principle has its limits, and moreover, what is a coherent reason in primitive societies is often not acceptable to the moral standards of Christendom, the yardstick against which any dubious practice should be ultimately measured.

Most of the book is straight analysis. Only at the end does Banfield draw larger lessons, all pessimistic. He notes that “[e]xcept in Europe and America, the concerting of behavior in political associations and corporate organizations is a rare and recent thing.” By this he does not mean electoral politics or corporate business. Rather, he means intermediary institutions focused on achieving some benefit for the common good, often a longer-range benefit. He notes that coordinated action beyond the family or tribe is rare, and our assumption that it arises naturally when needed is false, and wholly dependent on culture. He directly ties such organizations to a society’s success, focusing on economic success. It is true enough that such organizations do not seem to exist outside of Europe and America (although they are not at all recent—they characterized the successful parts of Europe for a thousand years, and America until, ironically, just after Banfield wrote

his book). I'm not so sure, however, that they are necessary for economic success—as far as I can tell, they are mostly lacking in China, where a strong state and a different culture appears to substitute. I suspect they are entirely necessary for true long-term civilizational success, as I somewhat narrowly define it, and there is much evidence that China will again, as it always has, fail to achieve such success, perhaps in part because of this lack. (Maybe James C. Scott is right, in his *Against the Grain*, that civilization itself is overrated, and we'd all be happier off as hunter-gatherers.)

Banfield wrote, though, when the success of the West seemed it might be achievable for the rest of the world (and there appeared no chance the West would fall from its pinnacle). He struck a pessimistic note at a time when others assumed the rest of the world was following the path blazed by the West, unemotionally concluding, "There is some reason to doubt that the non-Western cultures of the world will prove capable of creating and maintaining the high degree of organization without which a modern economy and a democratic political order are impossible." Banfield was aware that Italy as a whole was fairly successful; his point was that in a society composed only of Montegrano, success was impossible. And so it has proved to be, by and large. True, some non-Western cultures have, since 1958, managed to maintain a modest degree of what appears to be civilizational success, at least in economic development. This has always been done only by adopting Western practices and technology, and it is not clear how sustainable this is, especially if a country also imports today's Western corrosive and destructive cultural practices, we having left what made us successful far behind.

What of Montegrano, that is, Chiaromonte, today? Very little English-language information is available. The population is now only 2,000—as with most European farming villages, there is little to keep people there, especially as the population ages, other than tourism. You can walk through it virtually, using Google, but you can't find any information about its current social situation. It would be interesting to know if there is more social cohesion today than then. Italy itself, of course, like all of Europe, is a dying society, with far bigger problems than the corrosion of amoral familism, so it doesn't really matter. Still, it's surprising nobody seems to have done a follow-up.

And the key question—has America itself become a version of what Montegrano was? The same defects found in Montegrano, along with many others far more pernicious, have, unfortunately, become common in America, as our nation reverts to the historical global mean. True, even in its early years, America was far from a monolithic or ideal culture, and as outlined in the classic *Albion's Seed*, had superior and inferior sub-cultures, that somehow managed to produce an excellent ruling class and enough virtue and competence to build a strong and radically successful country. With the destruction of the social fabric wrought by the Left over the past hundred, and especially over the past sixty, years, neither of these things is now true. The American equivalents of Montegrano have been documented recently by authors such as Chris Arnade and J. D. Vance, but such defective sub-cultures have become far more widespread and far more deficient than they once were, creating tens of millions of Americans living in a permanent grossly culturally defective underclass, ruled by a atrocious ruling class. The Left is fine with this, as long as they can gain power and profit as a result, and in fact keeps power in our pseudo-democracy by manipulating the sometimes-justified resentments of the underclass to their benefit. As we rocket downhill, all the while the catamite Right, self-delusional as always, still believes, against all evidence, that American culture is still sound, simply experiencing a few challenges, and we'll be all the better for going through a little turmoil.

It is thus hopeless to hope for a return of the old strong American culture. Or so it seems, on our screens, whence now comes all information. Perhaps this is mostly an illusion, though. Perhaps what our screens offer is mere gaslighting propaganda, with the aim of demoralizing the virtuous among us so they can be easily steamrolled into the mass graves the Left always prepares for its enemies. This is the question of the hour, or of the millennium, and on it, everything turns. One thing we know—there exist, as there always have in the West, pockets, perhaps giant pockets, where the old culture that made America successful still soldiers onward. Their inhabitants are gagged and bound by the poisonous lords of this present age, but they chafe and seethe. How many are they? Are they willing and able to decisively act in their interests, especially if granted, for the first time in a hundred years or more, a leader who can and will actually reify their cherished wishes?

If not, our future is Montegrano writ larger and nastier. If yes, we will find the way out by going through. Which it is, we are likely to find out soon. Or, as the memes say, “Which way, Western man?”