

Leisure Reflections Number 54: Collective Selfishness through Citizenship: On the Dark Side of Political Participation

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“Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live.”

—*Oscar Wilde*

As far as I know I was the first to apply the idea of selfishness to the study of leisure (Stebbins, 1995), it having been evident in my set of studies of amateurs undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s. To the present, my conceptualization of such behavior has been what we may call *interpersonal selfishness*, or the act of a self-seeker judged as selfish by the victim (another individual) of that act (Stebbins, 1981). And, though this article is mainly about another type of selfishness – the collective variety – we must first, to have a basis for comparison, describe its interpersonal cousin.

When we define an act as selfish, we make an imputation. This imputation is most commonly hurled at perceived self-seekers by their victims, where the self-seekers are felt to demonstrate a concern for their own welfare or advantage at the expense of or in disregard for those victims. The central thread running through the fabric of this interpersonal selfishness is exploitative unfairness – a kind of personal favoritism infecting the everyday affairs of many people in modern society. In comparing the three forms of leisure (comprising the serious leisure perspective), it is evident that serious leisure is nearly always the most complicated and enduring of them and, for this reason, often takes up much more of a participant’s time (Stebbins, 1995). Consequently, it is much more likely to generate charges of selfishness. The foregoing definition of selfishness is common sense, in that it closely resembles the one in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (5th ed., 2002). Yet, as we shall see, some students of the subject have strayed from this basic conception.

Collective Selfishness

We can introduce this second type by elaborating the definition of interpersonal selfishness just presented. At the risk of stressing the obvious, it should be noted that a selfish act is necessarily a goal-directed one. Self-seekers have certain ends in mind, the pursuit of which results in what others define as unfair exploitation. Nevertheless, we shall see that they may be surprised, even chagrined, to learn that their purposive behavior has been defined *by* its victims as hurtfully self-centered.

The earlier definition, in its one-sentence simplicity, suggests that the victim loses something in this unhappy exchange with the self-seeker. More precisely, victims impute selfishness where they fail to benefit as expected. A refusal to share some valued item is often at issue.

The antithesis of selfishness is self-sacrifice, which gives us further insight into the nature of the first. In self-sacrifice one's person or interest is surrendered for others or for some cause or ideal. It contains "breadth and magnanimity," as Charles Horton Cooley (1922, p. 220) put it, in contrast to the "narrowness" of the self-seeker's orientation.

All this applies to collective selfishness as well as to its interpersonal counterpart. In the first type, however, the victims are many: co-citizens of the larger society as identified by race, religion, sex, social class, ethnic origin, ideological opposition (eg, anti-abortion/for-abortion, evangelical principles), or a combination of these and perhaps others. Examples of some of them are presented in the next section. Before this let us consider certain behavioral neighbors, or what selfishness is not.

Nathaniel Branden's (1961, p. 57) belief that altruism is the logical opposite of selfishness (or egoism as he preferred to call it) is, as just noted, inaccurate. It overlooks the fact that we can be altruistic without engaging in self-sacrifice. Altruism is the uncalculated consideration of, regard for, or devotion to others' interests. Thus, one could act altruistically by urging the government to tax the rich to give to the poor. Were that person in the middle class, he would have surrendered rather little wealth in making this altruistic appeal but would have made an effort to encourage this new policy.

Interpersonal selfishness usually occurs during leisure, though it is also found in non-work obligation. Collective selfishness is always voluntary action; it is un-coerced and therefore can be conceived of as leisure. The main difference between the two is that the first exploits a few intimates, whereas the second exploits much larger numbers of people. The second is also leisure for the selfish person, in that it fits our definition of leisure. Some of it is criminal, as in corruption, some is otherwise morally suspect according to its victims. A crucial condition is whether people know they are victims. Being only in indirect contact with the selfish person (or persons) makes recognition of exploitation more tenuous.

In short, collective selfishness though sometimes more difficult to discern and establish irrefutably, usually involves higher stakes than the personal kind. Examples of high stakes selfish goals of the collective kind include: government contracts favoring businesses of elected representatives, expanded governmental or private security services for representatives on selfish travels, appointment of friends who are politically compatible to governmental posts where they can work to make changes in policy in ways favorable to the representative's interests.

In *The Virtue of Selfishness* Branden collaborated with Ayn Rand to develop an ethical view of such behavior that diverges sharply from conventional usage and which the present article concentrates. Their work is mentioned here simply to identify one analytic route I will avoid. Rand (1961, p. x) defines selfishness as "concern with one's own interest," which is virtuous because it is a "rational self-interest," not one that is whimsical, emotional, or expressed at the expense, disregard, or disadvantage of others. Her "objectivist ethics" holds that actors must always benefit from their own actions. Exploiting others to reach this end is shortsighted they argued; it fails to achieve happiness or achieve the actor's own values. This makes the self-seeker a parasite. Nonetheless, the common sense meaning of selfishness is logically inconsistent with such philosophic distinctions, while Rand and Branden ignore this problem. Moreover, as stated above, selfish people do not always realize they are exploiting their victims. Rand and Branden's stance on selfishness has been challenged on numerous occasions, among them by Darryl Cunningham (2015).

Selfishness in Leisure

The case for interpersonal selfishness in leisure was made in Stebbins (1995). Today, how is social selfishness related to leisure as expressed in political participation? Smith, Stebbins, & Dover (1995, p. 177) state that such activity is

individual political voluntary action intended to affect governmental social policy, policy implementation, and decision-making, whether at a local (ie, citizen participation), regional, national, or international level. Political participation ranges from voting to involvement in political nonprofit groups. It may be motivated by selfish . . . or altruistic . . . goals, sometimes both.

Some political participation is seen as by the participant as non-work obligation and as such is not leisure (Stebbins, in press). Routine voting for government officials and policies is an example for many people. Involvement in politically-related letter-writing-campaigns is another.

A main concept for this discussion is that of *voluntary altruism*. This attitude, which lies at the heart of leisure volunteering, has six defining qualities:

1) a mix of humane caring and sharing of oneself and one's resources; 2) at least a moderate freedom to choose the activity; 3) a lack of coercion from biophysical, biosocial, or socially compelling forces; 4) a sensitivity to certain needs and wants of a target of benefits; 5) an expectation of little or no remuneration or payment in kind; and 6) an expectation of receiving some sort of satisfaction for action undertaken on behalf of the target (from Smith, Stebbins, & Dover, 2006, pp. 238-239).

The sixth quality recognizes the role of self-interest in volunteering. The second and third qualities refer to the leisure component of this activity. The first quality – sharing of one's resources – may amount to a personal sacrifice, but an altruist can share resources in a way not felt as a sacrifice (see example above about taxing the rich).

Voluntary altruism differs from *pure altruism*. The latter (sometimes known as “absolute altruism”) is an ideal form of altruism that is very rarely achieved in humans, imperfect as they are. In it the altruistic person is totally focused on helping and satisfying another person, group, or other target of benefits, doing so even without any sense of self-satisfaction from the altruistic act (Smith, Stebbins, & Dover, 2006, p. 19). The satisfaction found in an altruistic act might be, for example, feeling good about being altruistic as a socially valued trait or act, enjoying the satisfaction of the person helped, and helping the target of benefits gain some satisfaction from the act. Nevertheless, the pure altruist would never experience this positive feature of volunteering.

Reinhold Niebuhr (2010, pp. 48-49), though he does not weigh in on whether selfish political participation is leisure, nevertheless does see its pernicious effects on society:

Rationalism in morals may persuade men in one moment that their selfishness is a peril to society and in the next moment it may condone their egoism as a necessary and inevitable element in the total social harmony. The egoistic impulses are so powerful and insistent that they will be quick to take advantage of any such justifications. The utilitarian movement of the nineteenth century had the laudable purpose of persuading men to achieve a decent harmony between selfish and social impulse by diverting egoistic impulse to the most inclusive possible social objectives. It was significant that it merely provided the rising middle class with a nice moral justification for following its own interests.

All this helps explain Ayn Rand's objectivist stance. Meanwhile, viewed in leisure terms Niebuhr's observation about a moral justification for following middle-class interests provides another motivational explanation of collective selfishness.

Conclusion

Pointing out that exploitative political participation is “selfish” may be more powerful language with which to signal government malfeasance than such high-sounding terms as favoritism and collusion, while still underscoring the essence of the problem as expressed

in a serious-leisure or casual-leisure route to dark success and achievement. That route, when not dark, may be proper volunteering (no remuneration, uncoerced service, satisfying or fulfilling activity, etc.), as observed in planning and participating in political protests, attending meetings of a political party, holding office in such a party, and writing articles and open letters on political matters. Or the route may resemble devotee work, experienced as remunerated serious leisure as the career politician operates on a regional or national level by engaging in activities of which the majority of that person's constituents approve.

Some of the leisure found in political participation is unselfish, as seen in volunteering to facilitate voter registration, serving in a polling station, helping realize a popular cause, and sitting on the local community council. Selfishness begins to dominate and political participation then becomes darker when the career politician begins to work for special interests effected by exploiting one or more of the previously mentioned categories of citizens. People working (devotee) in this capacity may help spread misinformation to advance a political cause by way of the social media. Or they may serve voluntarily in activities that facilitate the goals of, for example, a political party, social movement, religious doctrine, or labor organization, when these goals are exploitative.

Percy Bysshe Shelley describes how commerce and gold have nurtured the roots of selfishness:

Commerce has set the mark of selfishness, the signet of its all-enslaving power, upon a shining ore, and called it gold: before whose image bow the vulgar great, the vainly rich, the miserable proud, the mob of peasants, nobles, priests, and kings, and with blind feelings reverence the power that grinds them to the dust of misery. (www.quoteland.com)

If the pursuit of gold is enslaving and fostering selfishness in the process, perhaps dark political participation is not leisure as all, as I have just claimed in this article. After all, leisure has been defined as uncoerced activity (Stebbins, 2012) and certainly not as enslavement. This is a matter of research, needed to determine if these participants are aware that they are exploiting certain categories of their constituents.

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On “All Professional Athletes are Amateurs – They, too, love Their Work”