

FIG Leaves

Volume 11 Issue 7 July 2002

July Meeting

Cindy Kerkhoff, President of Hemlock of Ohio and an active member of The Hemlock Society USA since 1996, will speak on

Our Search for a Peaceful Death

The mission of Hemlock of Ohio is to maximize the options for a dignified death, including voluntary physician aid in dying for mentally competent, terminally ill adults who request it, in the context of legal safeguards.

Hemlock USA has become well known for telling the terminally ill methods for ending their suffering. They have done this in books and videotapes, providing details of medications and other techniques for hastening death

Cindy will tell us about the services provided by Hemlock, including the Caring Friends Program. Caring Friends are trained volunteers who, with the back-up of a professional team, provide personal information and support for Hemlock members who have a life-threatening disease and who are contemplating a hastened death. He or she makes sure that the member has thoroughly considered all alternatives, does not die alone, and does not fail in the attempt

The Board Election

The Board Election - Board members are elected to two year-terms. Starting from the beginning, terms were staggered so that not all members are elected at the same time to preserve continuity. The elections take place at the Annual Meeting in August. This meeting coincides with the annual picnic. This year persons running for the Board include several whose terms are expiring and Boyd Riley who is running for the first time as follows:

Philip Ferguson
Michelle Grinoch
Joe Levee
George Maurer
Boyd Riley

Other nominations may be included from the floor but in any case no more than six nominees are to be elected. The complete board numbers twelve members. Those board members whose terms are not expiring who will continue their service on the board for the coming year are: Nurit Bowman, Frank Bicknell, Idelle Datlof, Edwin Kagin, Helen Kagin, and Tim Kelly.

Inside

Letter From the Editor
Idelle Datlof Page 2

FIG June Meeting
George Maurer Page 3

*The Clash of
Fundamentalisms: Crusades,
Jihads and Modernity*
Book Review Page 5

FIG Leaflets Page 6

The Pledge of Allegiance
...pre-1954 Page 7

Rationally Speaking:
Economic vs. Social health:
it's not the economy, stupid!
Massimo Pigliucci Page 8

Events

July Meeting
Cindy Kerkhoff
"Our Search for a Peaceful
Death"
Tuesday, July 23 at 7:00 P.M.
Vernon Manor Hotel

August Potluck/Pool Party
August 18th at 1:00

Letter from the Editor

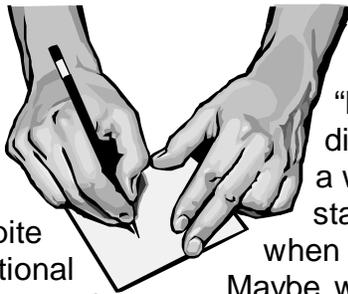
Sunday, July 14, 2002

Dear Fig Members:

It's out there! More and more, despite our natural preoccupation with national security, the tumbling stock market, and corporate creative accounting, the "God" thing keeps popping up. School vouchers to parochial schools in Ohio, the Pledge of Allegiance in California, the courts are still reinterpreting what Jefferson and the founders might have been intending more than two hundred years ago. Opinions are divided but the dialogue is getting louder.

I hear the creaky hinges of the closet door as the door struggles to open wider. I hear the voices of opposition reply defensively when they feel their sanctified turf may be threatened. What I don't hear much are the voices of everyday people who are living productive and ethical lives without the benefit of mythic concepts and comfort. I think it's a language problem. We don't have good words and catchy phrases. It's awkward to say, "I'm a not", rather than I'm a -----". We need some stirring songs. "God Bless America" is moving, emotional. We don't have anything to sing when we want to express love for country. On July 4, I invited some friends for a cook-in (it was too hot to do the traditional thing), and we read the Declaration of Independence before chowing down. We sang "This Land is Your Land" by Woodie Guthrie, (Arlo's Dad) which worked pretty well, but we only knew the first stanza so I'm not sure that it is politically correct in its entirety.

Instead of being "godless" or "atheist", words that say what we're not, isn't it time to find something more memorable, something you'd want to hum, or perhaps that makes a good acronym, or a ribbon for lapels or a logo for tee shirts? We've got too many different groups with insignificant differences reflected in their similar, but not identical names, that makes it hard to keep the basic idea up front. We don't "believe",



or "have faith", we just deal with reality in the most humane way possible. "Humane", now that's a good word. Why did we give it to the animal people? That's a word that respects and values, holds as a standard what homo sapiens is capable of when aggression and violence is controlled. Maybe we could have a contest or hire a public relations agency to come up with creative means to express the thoughtful, responsible and practical themes that inspire our lives. Or maybe we'll have to figure out how to do it ourselves.

Idelle

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FIG Meeting June 25, 2002

Speaker: Bill Jensen, University of Cincinnati

Subject: Ludwig Feuerbach: Religious Atheist

Biographical Data

Ludwig Feuerbach, the subject of this evening's talk was born in Bavaria in 1804, the son of German jurist, Paul Johann Anselm von Feuerbach. Although Bavaria, then as now, was primarily a Catholic region, the Feuerbachs were Protestant and it was the intention or desire of the father that his son pursue a course of study that would lead him to become a clergyman. Therefore, after completing his secondary education, Ludwig enrolled in the University of Heidelberg to study theology in 1823. While there he was repelled by the scholastic rationalizations of his theology professors. At the same time he became attracted to the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Hegel and moved to the University of Berlin to study with him.

After two years there, he was forced to move to the University of Erlangen because of financial difficulties. There he studied natural science and medicine. He obtained a doctorate in philosophy for his dissertation entitled: *Reason: Its Utility, Universality, and Infinity*. The following year (1829) he began teaching as a *privatdocent* in philosophy. This category of instructors was not paid by the university but was dependent upon the fees paid by the students they managed to attract to their classes.

The next year Feuerbach published his *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* in which he attacked the Christian concept of life after death. Although he published this work anonymously, word finally leaked out that he was the author. As a result of his authorship of this controversial work coupled with his clumsy lecture style, he lost his post at Erlangen thus guaranteeing that he would never gain a professorship.

He continued to write and publish although he eventually gave up the idea of pursuing a university career.

In 1837 he married Berta Low and moved to the village of Bruckberg where his wife had inherited a small porcelain factory. This inheritance provided them with an income thus enabling Feuerbach to continue to publish his philosophical works. His most famous work was *The Essence of Christianity* and its companion work *The Essence of Religion*.

During the Revolution of 1848 that swept through Europe during that year, he was invited to return to Heidelberg City Hall for a series of lectures on the Essence of Religion. It is these published lectures that are most understandable to the general

reader.

In 1860 the porcelain factory failed and they moved to Rechenberg, a small town near the city of Nuremberg. For the rest of his life the family was forced to live off the bounty of friends and strangers, particularly those who had immigrated to the United States after the failure of the 1848 revolution. Feuerbach died in 1872.

Philosophical Concepts

Feuerbach's main contention is that God is created in man's image rather than the other way around. Basically:

"This doctrine of mine is briefly as follows: *theology is anthropology*. In other words the object of religion which in Greek we call *theos* and in our language *God* expresses nothing other than the essence of man. Man's God is nothing other than the deified essence of man so that the history of religion or what amounts to the same thing, of God – for gods are as varied as mankind – is nothing other than the history of man."

Similar ideas were also expressed earlier by Xenophanes circa 500 BCE who rather humorously put it: "If oxen and horses and lions could draw and paint, they would delineate their gods in their own image." And Herbert Spencer, an English contemporary of Feuerbach: "It is now generally admitted that a more or less idealized humanity is the form which every conception of a personal God must take."

Feuerbach's rejection of religion is based almost solely upon psychological and philosophical arguments, rather than upon its conflicts with the historical and archeological record or with the naturalism of modern science.

His primary argument is that idealistic philosophy and religion alike have committed the psychological error known as *reification* (the act of regarding something abstract as a material thing. See also the *fallacy of misplaced concreteness*). They have mistaken abstract class concepts such as truth, beauty, space, time, cause and God for real things rather than as convenient linguistic generalizations for the description of the properties and emotions common to large numbers of individual material objects and individual human beings.

This idealistic interpretation of abstract ideas is often referred to as *realism*, whereas their interpretation as useful linguistic conventions is

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

referred to as *nominalism*.

The acceptance of reification has led to another major error in the inversion of cause and effect. Instead of interpreting the properties of individual objects and the emotions of man as the origin of abstract ideas, idealistic philosophy and religion alike have taken the abstractions to be the causes or origin not only of individual objects but of man himself.

Feuerbach began to recognize that the word God has a variety of meanings but this realization came in stages, first through his rejection of the philosophical idealism of Hegel, then through his rejection of the God of Christianity, finally through his analysis of paganism and primitive nature worship. He thus came to recognize that philosophical idealism from Plato to Hegel was nothing more than crypto-theology and that there were at least three different distinct, and often mutually contradictory interpretations of the concept of God:

God as nature itself (pantheism).

God as the external cause or creator of nature.

God as moral and spiritual guide and benefactor, i.e. as father and redeemer.

To quote from the lectures with respect to this third concept of God, Feuerbach says: "God as a moral being is nothing other than the deified and objectified mind or spirit of man, and in the last analysis theology is therefore nothing other than anthropology."

With respect to that aspect of God as a moral and spiritual guide he has less to say because he covered it more in depth in his earlier work but he did have this comment: "One of the most frequent laments heard from the religious and learned bewailers of atheism is that it destroys or ignores an essential need of man – the need to revere something higher than himself...atheism does not annul what is ethically and naturally higher. The ethically higher is the ideal that every man must pursue if he is to make anything worthwhile of himself; but this ideal must be a human ideal and aim."

In the conception of God as creator, he says: "It is a universal doctrine in our upside-down world that nature sprang from God, whereas we should say the opposite, namely that God was abstracted from nature and is merely a concept derived from it."

It is with the most primitive concept of God (God as Nature) that Feuerbach most closely

identifies: "Originally religion expressed nothing other than man's feelings that he is an inseparable part of nature. Though I myself am an atheist, I openly profess religion in the sense just mentioned, that is nature religion. I am not ashamed of my dependency on nature.... And I do not, like a Christian, believe that such dependency is contrary to my true being or hope to be delivered from it. I know further that I am a finite mortal being, and that I shall one day cease to be. But I find this very natural and am therefore perfectly reconciled to the thought."

Feuerbach strongly believed that atheism is not simply a negation of religion but a positive force, which promised to provide mankind with a healthier psychological approach to both life and death: "True atheism, the atheism that does not shun the light, is also an affirmation; it negates the being abstracted from man, who is and bears the name of God, but only in order to replace him by man's true being...atheism is positive and affirmative; it gives back to nature and mankind the dignity of which theism has despoiled them; it restores life to nature and mankind which theism has drained of their best powers."

Much of what Feuerbach has to say resonates in the Secular Humanist Manifesto II.

There were a number of questions from the audience; more than can be included here. But here is a sampling of a few:

Who invited Feuerbach back to Heidelberg for his lecture series? There was a revolutionary parliament in Frankfurt but the impetus for the invitation probably came from students. Then as now students were usually in the forefront of revolutionary movements. In Europe where religion was used to bolster the power of the state, during revolutionary upheavals the drive to change the political system frequently implied the overthrow of the church as well.

Another questioner found it strange that those freethought Germans who supported Feuerbach in later life had found refuge in the United States. The answer pointed out that these émigrés were intellectuals who fled Europe upon the failure of the revolution of '48 and brought with them their freethought notions. There was even one such organization right here in Cincinnati.

George Maurer



BOOK REVIEW

The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity

by Tariq Ali
(London: Verso, 2002)

The author tells us up front that he is an unbeliever, had secular parents and in fact enjoyed an atheist childhood. His extended family is Muslim, and he grew up in the Pakistan city of Lahore. He is a leftist writer, journalist, and activist who has written about a dozen books. This volume examines the history of events in the Islamic world up to and including the recent attack on the World Trade Center in New York. Anyone wishing to understand why Muslim fundamentalism has become so important recently, and why the leaders oppose the United States so forcefully will find this book quite instructive.

The thesis of the volume is focused on the demise of communism and the Soviet Union. Until 1991 United States foreign policy was narrowly and single mindedly concerned only with countering and defeating the Soviet Union. Any means and any allies were justified in this endeavor, no matter how sleazy, corrupt, or brutal they might be. In the third world, the democratic, rational, secular, progressive, and liberal left was often quite sympathetic to social and socialist solutions to problems besetting their countries. They were frequently also sympathetic to the Soviet Union and its economic model of development and industrialization. This brought the United States repeatedly into alliance with the more reactionary religious parties and authoritarian leaders. We supported these as long as they would do our bidding. Examples are the Shah of Iran, the corrupt Royal House in Saudi Arabia, various Pakistani military leaders, and Saddam Hussain in Iraq, at least as long as he was at war with the revolutionary Iran of the ayatollahs.

The United States is not regarded as a particularly well liked or benevolent entity. Rather, Ali refers to us as a rather virulent economic fundamentalism. We are willing to intervene or interfere anywhere in the world, at any time, when our interests are at stake. And our interests are largely selfish and greedy. We are quite willing to countenance war and destruction as long as it is in our interest, whether that is on the West Bank, in Serbia, in Iraq, or Afghanistan. In short, we are seen as a conscienceless imperial power, willing to trample on the lives and well being of anyone who

gets in our way.

Here is a long quote to give an idea of Ali's thinking: (pp. 189-190)

Zia's military dictatorship, once again fully backed by the United States, was the worst period in the country's history. Zia's men were dense, deaf and heartless. The new regime had decided to use Islam as its battering ram, and its bearded supporters, often incredibly stupid, were opportunist to the marrow of their bones. They combined religion with profanities of the vilest kind. Under Zia, despotism and lies mutilated a whole generation. Islamic punishments were introduced, public floggings and hangings instituted. The political culture of Pakistan was brutalized. It has still to recover. Washington and London watched from the sidelines as the country's elected leader was executed. Work on the nuclear programme continued, but Washington now chose to ignore the process because by now the pro-Moscow Afghan left had seized power in Kabul.

The Cold War had reached the Pamirs. The temptation to provoke, isolate and defeat Moscow proved too strong. A squalid military dictator became the instrument through which this campaign would be conducted. Everything else was subordinated to this single aim. In order to defeat the Soviet Union, two countries Pakistan and Afghanistan were totally wrecked. Fundamentalist Islam and heroin production grew apace.

And thus the CIA, the Pakistan secret service, and Saudi gold created the Taliban. Religious extremism had been generally little known in multi-ethnic and multi-religious Afghanistan. The CIA requested the Saudis to send a leader to imbue the Afghans with anti-communist religious fervor. The CIA got Osama bin Laden.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, we and they have turned on each other. During the Second World War we made common cause with the Soviets only to turn on them immediately after the war was ended. The author makes the comparison to the Islamic fundamentalists explicit. It looks like we have found the new global enemy for which we so diligently searched.

Wolf Roder

FIG Leaflets

The Rational Atheist Reality

Modern scientific discourse and practice appear heartless. Modern evolutionary and cosmological theory place us here as the unintentional by-products of essentially random processes. Meanwhile, in the last century we have witnessed an unholy alliance between the scientific community and the global military-industrial complex, with the means to wage mass campaigns of technological and psychological war against civilian populations turned into a branch of big business. All this, and technologically driven environmental degradation to boot. No wonder so many people are dissatisfied with the uncomfortable world view that seems to be on offer. A view that posits no intrinsic meaning to the presence and evolution of life in the universe. From a reasonable standpoint, rationalism seems to have exceeded its limits. Attempts to offset this discord between the reality people want and the one that is on offer have led numerous people to turn elsewhere: to religious dogma and fundamentalist beliefs of various kinds, to new age religions and therapies, to beliefs in ghosts, UFO's and alien abductions. This climate of "almost anything goes" can be contrasted with an equally unrealistic desire for simple solutions to complex problems with rapid military solutions to protracted political and economic difficulties just one example of this.

Ron Roberts, "Post-Modernism and Parapsychology"
The Skeptic (UK) vol. 14, (no. 4, 2001) p. 17

Love disrobed.

In the summer of 1999, Cornell University published research purporting to show love really is a drug. To be precise, it is a cocktail of dopamine, phenylethylamine and oxytocin in the bloodstream that produces the sensation we call infatuation. Love, the researchers argued, was in fact a chemically induced form of insanity. This condition lasts until the body builds up an immunity to the substances involved, which is usually just long enough to meet, mate and raise a child to early infancy.

Nicholas Fearn, *Zeno and the Tortoise* (2001) p. 1

Why do some teenagers commit senseless

murder?

. . . . emerging scientific research demonstrating that the brains of children and adolescents are not yet fully formed not yet equipped to make precisely the sort of emotional and rational decisions necessary to restrain impulses in certain situations that can lead to antisocial and criminal behavior. Adolescents, with directed and scrupulous supervision, can indeed change and grow emotionally and psychologically, but our public policy seems intent on denying this possibility. But if the government is in denial, the marketplace is not: with the help of exhaustive behavioral research, corporations have in recent decades spent hundreds of millions of dollars ransacking and exploiting the emotions and thought processes of adolescents and pre-adolescents. Roper ASW (with its *Roper Youth Report*), Teenage Research Unlimited, and similar organizations, using methods derived from the behavioral sciences, advise merchandisers and advertising companies on the latest semiotics of "cool" and consumer-friendly subversion. "We understand how teens think, what they want, what they like, what they aspire to be, what excites them, and what concerns them," the Teenage Research Unlimited Web site brags. What this understanding translates into in the marketplace is hypersexuality, aggression, addiction, coldness, and irony-laced civic disaffection the very seed-bed of apocalyptic nihilism.

Ron Powers, "The Apocalypse of Adolescence"
The Atlantic Monthly (March 2002) pp. 58-74

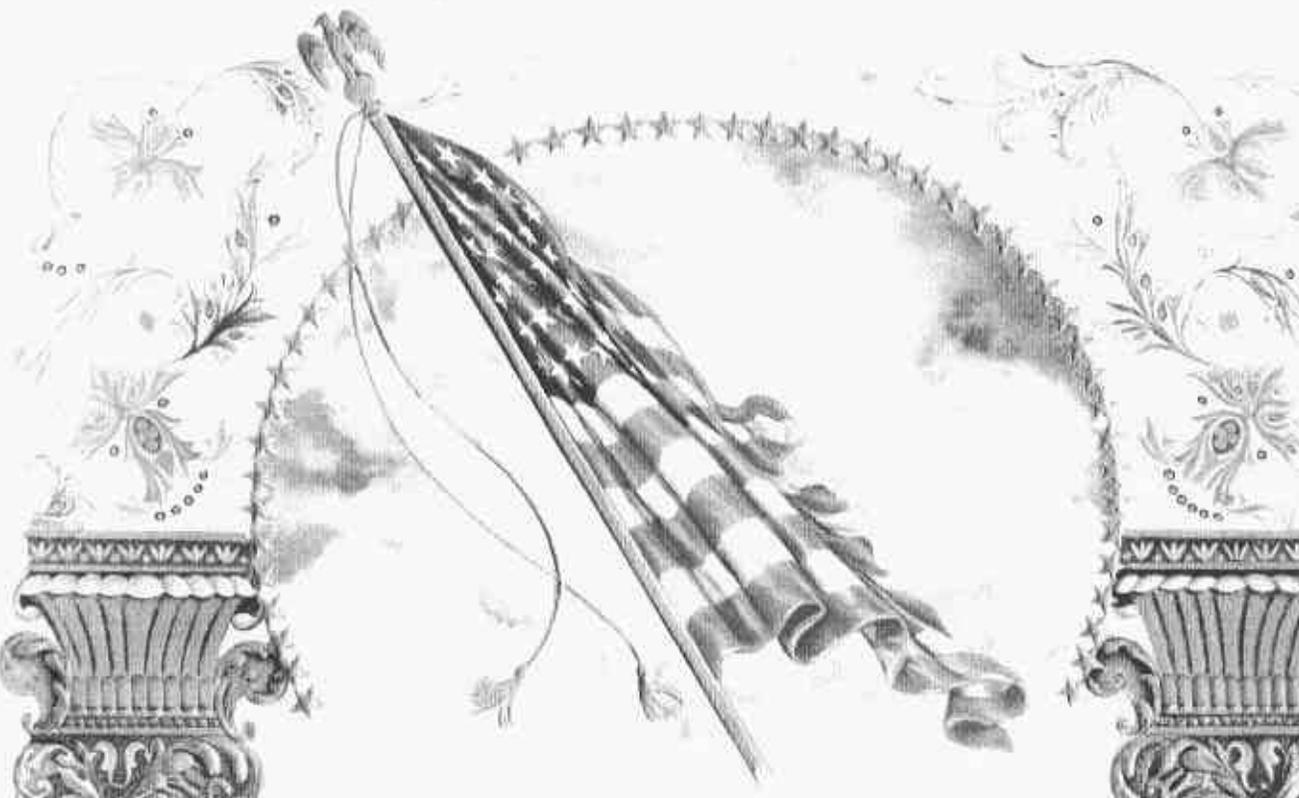
On the History of Geometry.

[Science] started with a little scheme hatched by Pythagoras: to employ mathematics as the abstract system of rules that can model the physical universe. Then came a concept of space removed from the ground we trod upon, or the water we swam through. It was the birth of abstraction and proof. Soon the Greeks seemed to be able to find geometric answers to every scientific question, from the theory of the lever to the orbits of the heavenly bodies. But Greek

civilization declined and the Romans conquered the Western world. One day just before Easter in A.D. 415, a woman was pulled from a chariot and killed by an ignorant mob. This scholar, devoted to geometry, to Pythagoras, and to rational thought, was the last famous scholar to work in the library at Alexandria before the descent of civilization into the thousand years of the Dark Ages.

Leonard Mlodinow, *Euclid's Window* (2001) p. x

Thanks to Wolf Roder for the Quotes.



I pledge allegiance to the Flag of
the United States of America
and to the Republic for which it stands,
One Nation Indivisible, with
Liberty and Justice
for All.





Rationally Speaking

A monthly e-column by
Massimo Pigliucci
Department of Botany,
University of Tennessee

N. 26, July 2002

Economic vs. Social health: it's not the economy, stupid!

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Money can't buy you happiness. Apparently, everybody knows this except Americans, who keep thinking that economic prosperity automatically brings all sorts of goodies, from democracy in the former Eastern Block to satisfaction with one's own life here at home. Well, the data are in, and the conclusion is that money really cannot buy us happiness.

Perhaps the most astounding indication of this is a simple but powerful graph published by the Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Policy: it shows a steady increase of the US Gross Domestic Product from 1959 to the late '90s. No question about it, America has obviously gotten richer. However, equally impressive—and much more disturbing—is the trend of the Institute's Index of Social Health, based on nine indicators that include child abuse, child poverty, high school dropout rates, average weekly earnings, unemployment, health insurance coverage, senior citizen poverty, health insurance for the elderly, food stamp coverage, access to affordable housing, and the gap between rich and poor. The social index went up in parallel with the economic one until the late 1970s. From then on it has changed to a downward spiral that

continues almost uninterrupted to this day. There appears therefore not to be an automatic link between economic prosperity and social health or, as a Brazilian general commented on that country's economic boom during the '70s: "the economy's doing fine, it's just the people that aren't."

This discrepancy can be glimpsed by the comparison of a few simple facts. The "good" news is that, in the period covered by the Fordham analysis, the average size of a new home has expanded from 1,500 to 2,190 square feet; the number of cars has risen from one for every two Americans age 16 or older to one for each driving-age individual; the number of Americans taking cruises each year has risen from 500,000 to 6,5 million; the production of recreational vehicles has soared from 3,000 to 239,000; and the number of amusement parks has leaped from 363 to 1,164.

Now for the bad news: suicide among America's young people has increased 36% since 1970, and triple the rate in 1950; the gap between rich and poor in America is approaching its worst point in fifty years and is the largest such gap among eighteen industrialized nations; average weekly wages, in real dollars, have declined 19% since 1973; the United States still leads the industrial world in youth homicide; America has more

children living in poverty (14.3 million) than any other industrial nation; 43 million Americans are without health insurance (the worst performance since records have been kept) and the number has increased by more than one third since 1970; and violent crime remains almost double what it was in 1970, even with substantial improvements during the 1990s.

Hmm, it seems like this picture makes no sense if one insists on making the equation 'more money = better life.' Of course, money does make a difference for both individuals and societies. After all, the economic and social health indices did grow in parallel for almost two decades. To paraphrase Karl Marx, before you can work on the meaning of your life you have to have enough food in your stomach. But once peoples and societies reach a certain degree of economic prosperity, things become a bit more complex.

One of the factors that complicate things in the US is that the huge gap between the rich and poor is not counterbalanced by much of a social net to help

(Continued on page 9)

Quote of the month:

**"If we do not
maintain Justice,
Justice will not
maintain
us." (Francis Bacon)**

(Continued from page 8)

the poor get better health, education, and, therefore, jobs. This relates to what is perhaps one of the most dangerous myths of American society: that this is the land of opportunities. Sure, it is if you are in the highest socio-economic classes and you wish to keep accumulating wealth across generations, as several dynasties of magnates have done since the beginning of the industrial history of this country and continue to do now (Vanderbilt and Trump come to mind as just two examples among many). This is also the land of opportunities in a rather more limited fashion, for example if you are a poor immigrant aiming to, at least, save your family from starvation, perhaps even getting to possess your very own VCR. But upward mobility in the US (or the myth of “from the log cabin to the White House,” as it is sometimes referred to) is actually no different, and it is even worse, than that in most other industrialized countries, when one bothers to use actual data instead of political rhetoric. The American poor are actually locked into their status: 54 per cent of those in the bottom 20 per cent in the 1960s were still there in the 1990s, and only 1 per cent had migrated to the top 20 per cent. The US has the lowest share of workers moving from the bottom fifth into the second fifth, the lowest share moving into the top 60 per cent and the highest share of workers unable to sustain full-time employment. And Americans are way overworked compared to their European counterparts.

Next time you are told that you live in a society where everybody can become President or, better, the CEO of a large company, ask about the actual numbers instead of unrepresentative anecdotes. You’ll be surprised to find out that the American dream is really a nightmare for far too many people. Isn’t it time to wake up?

Next month:
Is God in our brains?

© by Massimo Pigliucci, 2002

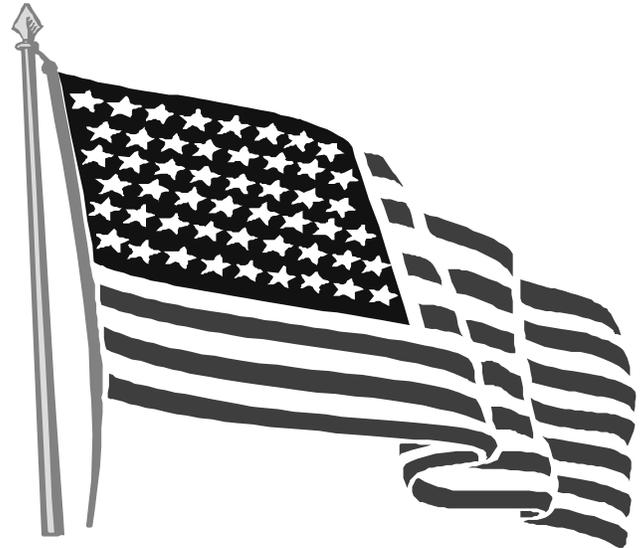
Many thanks to Melissa Brenneman and Bob Faulkner for patiently editing and commenting on Rationally Speaking columns.

Further readings:

A Theory of Justice, by John Rawls, perhaps the most important book on justice of the 20th century.

Web links:

The Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Policy, the people that invented the Index of Social Health discussed in this article. (<http://www.fordham.edu/gss/isp/>)



PLEDGE

People's eyes now open

Even if overturned, the decision by the 9th Circuit regarding the Pledge of Allegiance will have lasting benefits. It opened people's eyes.

Many whites before the civil rights movement couldn't understand why blacks would complain about sitting in the back of the bus or drinking at separate fountains. After all, they reached their destination and quenched their thirst just the same.

Likewise, it's clear from polls that most cannot fathom why atheist Americans would be offended by a pledge and a national motto that excludes nonbelievers. Let's be honest, though. Even those who understand the concerns don't really care. They think those uppity atheists should just keep their mouths shut and deal with it.

Rosa Parks and others in the civil rights movement didn't keep their mouths shut. They opened the eyes of this nation to the fact that blacks would no longer be satisfied with second-class treatment. Michael Newdow has done the same for atheists.

Matthew J. Barry
Issaquah

<http://www.eastsidejournal.com/sited/story/html/98233>