

JOHN COURTNEY MURRAY GROUP

THE ETHICS OF CITIZENSHIP AND ECONOMIC REALITY

Panelists: Dennis McCann, DePaul University
Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Monmouth College
Thomas O'Brien, St. Bernard's Institute
George Weigel, Ethics and Public Policy Center

Our discussions pivoted around three periods of U.S. economic adjustment: (1) the end of the Depression and advent of World War II; (2) the expanding economy of the 1950s; and (3) current American economic dislocations. McCann outlined two indirect treatments and evaluations by Murray of the economy. In a 1940 series of talks, Murray (echoing European critiques of Americanism) found at the heart of the U.S. economy a materialism, an individualism, and a practical atheism, for which he offered as correctives the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation, the Trinity, and the cross. On the other hand, in chapter 4 of his *We Hold These Truths* (1960), Murray judged that a healthy moral consensus directed the U.S. economy—that the moral sense of the people directed, judged, and corrected the inherent oligarchic tendencies of a capitalist economy.

McCann and Andolsen then expanded the discussion to the present U.S. economy. While McCann allowed that, in the late 1950s, big business responded to larger moral claims, he noted that recent economic and cultural shifts have minimized that moral sensitivity. Andolsen pointed out that, while the late 1950s social contract excluded blacks and women, it did include white and blue collar males. While she applauded Murray's ideal of equal social footing—which requires access to the tools needed for full economic participation, she noted that the expanding service sector's ability to partially correct for contemporary economic dislocations (by absorbing women, minorities, and some blue collar whites into lower paying jobs) has crested. She closed by suggesting that affirmative action programs are needed to adjust for the unconscious bias or covert discrimination that distort the ideal of equal economic participation.

From an interpretation of the work of John Paul II, Weigel claimed that Catholic doctrine can (re)build barriers against current assaults on human dignity, thereby developing a foundational moral consensus needed for a just economy. He asserted that recent adjustments in Catholic social teaching offer the best hope for weeding out socially destructive notions of autonomous individualism,

and applauded Dole's recent critique of Hollywood as an example of the type and direction that a Catholic contribution might take.

O'Brien, speaking from his experience with the Rochester House of Mercy, found that Murray's earlier analysis still rings true among the economically marginalized. However, O'Brien questioned Murray's presupposition that the economy is at its roots, even historically, sound. Those at the margins judge that present increasing economic alienation and dislocation are logical outcomes of, not temporary deviations from, the foundational expectations that drive our economy.

Within apparent agreement that our present economy requires building a new national consensus, our subsequent discussions circled around, but did not resolve, the question of which virtues and policies might aid that needed cultural development.

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