

Your View: Pope Francis knows how to get at the conservatives

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"Pure Marxism," decried Rush Limbaugh in response to Pope Francis' first encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium*, or the Joy of the Gospel. Bill O'Reilly later said that Jesus, "wouldn't be down" with giving food stamps to the drug addicted: "If you're an [addict] and you can't hold a job, and you can't support your children, ... then you're bringing the havoc. You're asking people who may be struggling themselves to put food on the table to give their tax money to you, ... and then you're going to buy booze and drugs with it." It looks like Pope Francis has rattled a few conservative cages with his new emphasis on the plight of the poor. Let me offer one reason why.

John Locke once famously suggested we are born but blank slates, and our conception of the world around us is nothing more than the sum total of our experiences imprinting themselves on that slate. Can you feel the passivity in those words? This particular theory went on to have a major impact in the 20th century, especially in the work of B.F. Skinner.

Skinner figured, "Why stop at knowledge?" All of human behavior, Skinner thought, could be explained by how we respond to our environment leaving the individual's role in this analysis more of an empty vessel. Skinner was wrong, very wrong, and a young man from MIT, Noam Chomsky, made a name for himself in 1977 when he published an academic paper blowing Skinnerian Behaviorism out of the water. Skinner's Behaviorism was a major theory in 20th century psychology, and, as a result, had a reasonably far-reaching impact on other disciplines. One example was its impact on the Nature/Nurture debate.

Much of what we understand about human nature comes to us through that debate. Nature/Nurture asks, "What role does the environment play in shaping our destiny, as opposed to the genes our ancestors provided us with." This is a very touchy argument. Since the dawn of science, racists have been using the "pro-gene" (Nature) argument to make the case that certain cultures, or peoples, are inherently inferior to others. The 19th century actually had a name for it: "The White Man's Burden." Liberals gravitated toward the environmental (Nurture) conclusion because it gave rise to an egalitarianism they were more comfortable with. It turns out that the truth is something in between, slightly favoring our genes, but we also have learned that the strong role our genes play needn't give rise to those ridiculous racist arguments.

Here's where it gets interesting. This conversation triggers a principle that philosophers call, "agency." If I can take a child of any pedigree, and turn her into a sinner or a saint, a doctor or a thief, based solely upon what environment I subject her to (an inner-city ghetto or elite private schools), exactly what room is left for "personal responsibility?" The choices she's making are defined by her environment. She's reacting, albeit with a textured richness commensurate with the complexity of her brain, but reacting nonetheless. Sure, she can choose between reading the New York Times and the Washington Post on any given morning, but her environment has defined the limits of her world as well as her idea of right and wrong just as it has from culture to culture and age to age since the dawn of time. Behaviorism fell by the wayside, but the independent science behind Nurture remained strong.

Modern American conservatism represents a triumph of the rich and powerful over all who remain in this country. Our proud progressive roots, from FDR to the Great Society, evidenced a strong Christian morality for caring for the most vulnerable among us while, at the same time, recognizing that without middle-class labor, the rich and powerful in this country would have nothing. The wealthy now had to distract the middle class while they dismantled this tradition. They chose a divide a conquer strategy, but to succeed — to pit the middle class against the poor — the poor could not simply be victims of their own circumstance, they had to be at fault, they had to bear the blame for the same poverty that shackles them.

We live in a capitalist system that has a built in "structural" unemployment rate. When everything is working great, this system guarantees an impoverished underclass. Meanwhile, there are CEOs in this country at the helm of multi-million- or multi-billion-dollar corporations who will die of lung cancer because they can't quit smoking. When the poor lose their battle against the mental health and drug addiction issues that bedevil them, we throw them in jail. When the rich and powerful succumb to their own avarice, we bail them out, give them a tax break, and send them on their way. Pope Francis hasn't just embraced the original teachings of Jesus of Nazareth by pointing to Republican policies such as supply-side economics as the cause of the problem, he's warming up the glue that binds together an entire power structure.