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## Caught in the Crossfire: A Policy Maker's Guide to Navigating Difference How should policy makers think of individuals and groups, of constructions of self and society

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Policy makers face an impossible challenge: to unite people with incompatible desires. They're caught in the crossfire of competing metanarratives—systems of belief that tell us why the world exists and instruct us in morality.

Policy makers will never experience a scenario where every stakeholder's desires are satisfied, and they will rarely face dilemmas where the correct decision is clear. As much as they would like to have a clear view of the world, the political pressures they face are a constant reminder that individuals within a society rarely agree on morality. They are continually aware that humans see the world in deeply conflicting ways.

The purpose of this paper is not to explore the different ways people see the world through philosophy or theology. Policy makers should always explore these subjects to pursue increasingly detailed insights into how humans see the world. However, millions of pages have already been written on the subject. This paper is also not a war plan for winning others to this or that side, and it's not necessarily an argument for any particular worldview. Its purpose is to explore the interplay between objective and subjective realities, to examine and critique ways of grouping belief systems, and to provide suggestions for building solidarity between people with different belief systems.

### **The interplay between subjective and objective reality**

Policy leaders must first understand the interplay between subjective and objective reality both in their own minds and in the minds of their constituents.

For this paper, objective reality is the totality of things that are intrinsically true, both corporeal and immaterial, whether they can be proven or disproven. Subjective realities will be defined as the abstractions of objective reality constructed by those observing and experiencing it.

While these subjective understandings exist within objective reality, they are subject to the limitations of human perception and comprehension and are therefore intrinsically incomplete. They are formed by individuals the way an artist creates a painting of a complex scenic view. Regardless of the artist's skill, the result cannot possibly capture the full reality of the scene. The painting exists statically on a canvas, while the actual scene it portrays is dynamic, multidimensional, inhabited with living creatures and subject to cosmic forces yet to be discovered, let alone understood. Similarly, subjective constructs of reality are at best flawed interpretations of an individual's observations of objective reality in all of its dynamic mystery.

The incomplete nature of subjective realities should not lead policy leaders to dismiss them, and neither should they reject notions of objective reality. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, educator and philosopher Paulo Freire outlines the

necessity of respecting both objective and subjective realities. Both are vital for human development: “One cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity,” he says, and “denial of objectivity in analysis or action” results in “solipsistic realism”, leading to a preoccupation with the theoretical without an imperative for objective action.<sup>1</sup>

As crude as subjective realities are compared to objective reality, they hold tremendous power over the minds and hearts of their possessors. “We sacrifice for our visions,” says Thomas Sowell in *Conflict of Visions*, “and sometimes, if need be, face ruin rather than betray them.”<sup>2</sup> Subjective realities both shape and are shaped, both inhabit and are inhabited by the humans that use them. Leaders cannot fully understand another person’s subjective reality any more than they can fully understand objective reality. Nevertheless, if they fail to respect the power of subjective realities of their constituents, they risk misunderstanding them. This will lead to unnecessary conflict, anger, and alienation.

Policy leaders must be aware of the limited utility of their own subjective realities. Ideally, policy leaders could make decisions with pure objectivity. Not only is it self-deception to believe that decision-makers are capable of doing so, but their lack of awareness of the limitations of their understanding of reality can result in disaster.<sup>3</sup> A man may have a subjective belief he can fly, but if he jumps from a high-rise building to prove it, objective reality will quickly correct him. Similarly, a policy maker may implicitly deny the reality of entropy by deferring infrastructure maintenance, but objective reality will gradually reveal itself in the form of potholes and broken pipes.

Objective reality is endlessly complex and impossible to fully understand. Nevertheless, every policy leader is responsible for bringing his or her subjective reality in compliance with objective reality as much as possible. A humble policy maker will maintain a state of mind that is responsive to new discoveries that contradict his or her subjective morality. As he or she gains experience, his or her subjective reality will grow closer to objective reality. This requires a constant pursuit of knowledge and insight from a variety of sources: education, scientific disciplines, theology and religion, arts and humanities, life experience, and community engagement are all means of gathering a more complete picture of objective reality. An enhanced understanding of the forces that shape the world, both physical and metaphysical, will lead to more accurate predictions for the future and better decisions in the present.

Policy leaders must also be aware of their ability to influence the subjective reality of other people. As humans inhabit and are inhabited by their subjective

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<sup>1</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 50.

<sup>2</sup> McDermott, *A Conflict of Visions (Summary)*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> McDermott, 2

realities, they also influence the subjective realities of others. This may be done through casual conversations behind closed doors over the course of many years, or it may be done by focused discussion and research. Billion-dollar media industries exist to foster the development of subjective realities among masses of people through news commentary, advertisements, stories, music, and books. Those who better understand the art of influencing other humans will have a powerful advantage over those who don't and can command high salaries from those with a desire to drive change.

The power to shape the subjective realities of others can be used both for good and evil: "Politics offers a grand canvas on which those who prey on others can paint their gruesome pictures," says the political philosopher Jean Elshtain.<sup>4</sup> Leaders are fully capable of crafting subjective realities based on lies and pitching them to their followers as accurate reflections of objective reality, influencing them to alter their actions in ways that benefit their leaders. Leaders who prefer their followers to "continue in a state of [impotency] in the face of oppressive reality"<sup>5</sup> may also withhold true insights about objective reality from their followers.

The tension between objective and subjective reality is an unavoidable constant in human existence. Inevitably, however, objective reality asserts itself as an immovable opponent to false understandings of reality. Policy makers must be careful not to deny or underestimate this fact in their decision making. As they navigate the limits of their own minds and explore the minds of others, they must not underestimate the power of the subjective realities constructed by humans to shape their minds. To underestimate the power of subjective realities is to "admit the impossible: a world without people."<sup>6</sup> They must also recognize the necessity of acknowledging objective reality, without which "there would be no human action."<sup>7</sup>

### **Grouping Subjective Realities**

The dichotomous ways of grouping subjective realities in popular discourse—Democrat and Republican, rural and urban, majority and minority—fail to capture the complexity of American thought.

"Contrary to the popular prejudice that America is the nation of unintellectual and anti-intellectual people," says Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*, America is a nation founded by philosophers and is "nothing but a great stage" for subjective perceptions of reality.<sup>8</sup> America is pluralist at its roots. Its ethics of freedom, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness have left its inhabitants

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<sup>4</sup> Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self (The Gifford Lectures)*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Freire, 52.

<sup>6</sup> Freire, 52.

<sup>7</sup> Freire, 52.

<sup>8</sup> Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 57.

with the beautifully absurd presumption that their subjective speculations on reality are as good as anyone else's. In their minds, the only dialectical danger is to be closed to the "new manifestations of progress"—that is, to be closed to the evolution or discovery of new subjective realities.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, America is a vigorous marketplace of ideas where schools of thought proliferate, and whose inhabitants largely make up their beliefs as they go along. An American proliferation of ideas has both resulted in and been the result of an unprecedented decentralization of intellectual authority between and among populations over the course of many centuries. This dramatically contrasts with previous eras of history when society received its moral instruction and metaphysical framework from superior authorities and spiritual belief hierarchies.

The right to resist authorities at odds with perceived reality runs deep in the veins of Western culture, from prefeudal Germany,<sup>10</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century Thomism,<sup>11</sup> to post-Rousseauian revolutions,<sup>12</sup> and finally to new extreme levels in the post-Marx, Freud, and Nietzschean eras of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.<sup>13</sup> The result has been a "sacred principle...that the individual is entirely sovereign over himself," setting the foundation for the proliferation of subjective reality in the United States.<sup>14</sup>

As American subjective realities have proliferated, a diverse range of theories and academic disciplines have been developed to find patterns and consolidate various beliefs into categories and, as political leaders hope, coalitions. But with subjective realities come subjective beliefs about the common good, the self, human rights, and the responsibilities of society. It would be nice if these varied beliefs were compatible, but these ideas frequently contradict each other in very fundamental ways. Policy leaders have the unenviable task of building coalitions of people who may believe they are incompatible with each other.

Intense conflict exists within the United States between people who are dissatisfied with the status quo. Their objections are infinitely diverse and vary so widely that they transcend the simplistic commercialized discussions of corporate media. Constrained visions of reality are a set of beliefs that humans must have their worst nature kept in check by institutions and conventions. Whereas unconstrained visions of reality postulate that the true potential of humans is suppressed by those same institutions and conventions.<sup>15</sup> The innate incompatibility of these visions is self-evident: constrained visions of reality seek to foster institutions while unconstrained visions seek to dismantle them.

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<sup>9</sup> Bloom, 29.

<sup>10</sup> Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self (The Gifford Lectures)*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Elshtain, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Elshtain, 137.

<sup>13</sup> Elshtain, 147.

<sup>14</sup> Elshtain, 181.

<sup>15</sup> McDermott, *A Conflict of Visions (Summary)*, 4.

Another way of categorizing subjective realities is through intersectionality, an academic theory that is perhaps the most comprehensive attempt to systematically categorize the interests of different groups of Americans. Although its roots are in a Marxist approach to feminism, race, and class,<sup>16</sup> its well-developed and extensive body of literature has applications well beyond politics. Intersectionality can be thought of as a shorthand tool to predict the interests and challenges of individual Americans based on their race, class, gender, and sexual identity. While much of intersectionalist literature is hampered by an excessive ideological bent, its best thinkers are extremely skilled at deconstructing the subjective realities of others and identifying underlying assumptions that drive American culture.

A key drawback to intersectionality is that it fails to provide policy leaders with a clear definition of the common good because it undermines the concept of objective truth. Instead, all that exists, according to intersectional theory, are an endless array of subjective realities in an endless struggle for domination and power. This way of thinking is at odds with an ethos that humans are united in a quest to understand a singular objective reality. While those who believe in objective reality may discuss their perspectives and build coalitions based on a belief in a greater good based on belief in a greater truth, intersectional theories believe that the primary motivator for human compromise is the desire for power, not truth.<sup>17</sup> This subtle but powerful shift of perspective gives a much harder edge to coalition building and sets the stage for its different groups to justify dehumanizing each other. This ethos has more in common with Abrahamic religions than with classical liberalism.

Furthermore, intersectionality is an unconstrained vision of reality and is therefore incompatible with the existing American political and institutional structure. Fully embracing the prescriptions of intersectionality necessitates the alienation of huge segments of the American population. Policy makers who desire revolution may find the potential for political restructuring inspiring, but this vision of reality fails to arm policy makers with more day-to-day political needs.

Intersectionality is best used as an investigative tool to explore the needs of individual groups. However, its divisiveness limits its usefulness to policy makers. A more nuanced approach to grouping subjective realities is to examine people through the lens of their cultural affiliation. While intersectionality treats individuals as members of identity groups based on race, gender, class, and sexual identity, a more pluralistic approach considers the intellectual heritage of entire cultural groups regardless of their biological classifications. While intersectionality underestimates the power of intellectual heritage to shape people's subjective

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<sup>16</sup> Coleman, *What's Intersectionality?*

<sup>17</sup> Sullivan, *The Roots of Wokeness*.

realities, pluralism recognizes the tremendous power of metaphysical belief over hearts and minds. On a superficial level, intersectionality treats humans as automatons whose behavior is determined by their skin color and sexuality; whereas pluralism gives more weight to the legacy of thinking, ethics, and morality passed down from generation to generation.

In his book *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*, economist Thomas Sowell argues that culture has a more powerful influence on people's subjective realities than skin color. He describes the similarities between black and white cultures in the Antebellum South, which "produced lower levels of achievements for both blacks and whites, compared to other members of their respective races from different cultures."<sup>18</sup> He attributes this similarity in lower achievement to a "redneck culture" which already existed in Britain. Sowell argues that early slaveholders imported this culture to the southern United States and imposed it upon black slaves.

Sowell contrasts northern Blacks with southern Blacks, who shared their racial identity but not the New England culture. He argues that, in addition to racism, a cultural disconnect between southern Blacks and northern Whites contributed to the rise of the Ku Klux Klan during the Great Migration.<sup>19</sup> Based on his arguments and research, it's clear that subjective realities are transmissible across racial boundaries and that similarities in subjective beliefs are powerful uniting forces. While the experiences stemming from race are extremely powerful shapers of subjective realities, cultural influence transcends the influence from all other identity groups.

No method of grouping subjective realities exists that can fully capture the diversity of human belief. However, each of them offers insights for policy leaders and can help them predict what people will believe about their conceptions of self, society, and how humanity ought to live.

### **Unity Despite Subjective Realities**

Policy leaders face an impossible challenge: to unite people with incompatible desires. Nevertheless, it is a challenge to which they must rise because the consequences of failing to do so are dire: "Where visions conflict irreconcilably," Sowell says, "whole societies may be torn apart."<sup>20</sup>

Disagreement and conflict are constant features of human existence and have been for all of recorded history, but so are conflict resolution, coalition building, and reconciliation. Otherwise, no social order could exist. The vast majority of humans are intrinsically driven to live more or less in harmony with

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<sup>18</sup> Sowell, *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*, location 1245.

<sup>19</sup> Sowell, location 1276.

<sup>20</sup> McDermott, *A Conflict of Visions (Summary)*, 1.

each other. Their motives may be altruistic, or it may simply be that humans are rational and self-interested enough to realize that they must live at peace with one another if they want to live well, regardless of their political and moral discontentment.

Humans depend on each other. Saint Thomas Aquinas observed in the 13th century that Man must “live in society so that one person can help another.”<sup>21</sup> Aristotle famously said that Man is inherently political<sup>22</sup> and that outside of society, he is something other than human.<sup>23</sup> Life without interdependence is impossible because even the slightest tasks and the merest level of survival requires cooperation with others. Management theorist Chester Barnard observed that whenever “a man enlists the aid of other men to do something which he cannot do alone, the objective ceases to be personal.”<sup>24</sup>

This interdependence may be the key to building the most basic levels of unity among friends, couples, parents, communities, and coworkers. But while interdependence can create cooperation between people who understand their need for each other, it doesn’t necessarily drive them to cooperate with people they feel no natural connection with or need for. Indeed, these rudimentary communities may still see their neighbors as threats to their well-being, and this potential is compounded by cultural differences, geographical separation, and conflicting political desires. Policy leaders in countries as large as the United States need other reasons to persuade their constituents to cooperate.

Therefore, humans must have a deep, conscious commitment to the well-being of their country if they are to be united. A hypothetical commitment to unity isn’t enough; it must manifest itself constantly from every decision made by voters and leaders at every level of government. America could not exist without this tangible commitment. And since America does still exist, one must conclude that this commitment still exists at least to some extent. Policy makers can and should appeal to this commitment to unity by identifying it in their constituents and bringing it to the forefront of the conversation.

The American toleration for the proliferation of subjective realities coexists with a general consensus that no individual knows all the answers, including oneself. This conviction leads to a paradoxical humility: “Although I may be arrogant enough to believe that I’m more correct than my neighbor,” an American folk philosopher might say, “I’m still humble enough to never forget that he or she might be more correct than I am.” The vigorous American market of ideas may seem arrogant and presumptuous, but the speed at which new ideas spread across it

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<sup>21</sup> Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self (The Gifford Lectures)*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Ouchi, *Markets, Bureaucracies, and Clans*, 1.



suggests that Americans are more open minded, open to correction, and humble than they get credit for. This openness is certainly not without its drawbacks, but it is what gives American intellectual life its dynamism. America would not have abolished slavery, entered deadly wars, or legalized abortion if its population wasn't open to persuasion within certain boundaries. Since America has made these changes, one must conclude that this openness still exists, even if cultural and political forces are battling this openness.

### **Conclusion**

Disagreement between humans is the rule, not the exception, and conflict is completely unremarkable. What's remarkable are the leaders, followers, and policy makers who are able to navigate disagreement and still build consensus. There are tools for grouping and understanding subjective realities, each with their strengths and weaknesses, but each have limits to their usefulness. To build coalition, policy leaders can speak to the subjective realities of their constituents and appeal to their need for each other, their commitment to the cohesion of the nation, and their openness to persuasion as they build coalition and unity.

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