

Time to Count Blessings Instead of Grievances

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By Thomas Sowell

STANFORD, Calif.—There was a time when Thanksgiving meant an occasion for counting our blessings. But, now that we have so many blessings that previous generations could hardly have dreamed about, we take them all for granted and are much more likely to count our grievances and the ways in which others have been unfair to us.

Everybody is for “fairness”—because we all use the same word to mean very different things. Most of us think you have been treated fairly when you have been treated the same as everyone else—subjected to the same rules and judged by the same standards. But some think that you have been treated fairly only if you have had the same chances as everyone else.

These are very different and completely incompatible notions.

People on opposite sides of political and legal issues often talk right past each other because they are using the same words to mean totally different and mutually contradictory things. When statistics are flung around on the “disparities”—often called “inequities”—between different groups, the implication is that such statistical differences could not exist without unfair treatment.

Even in situations where there is a total absence of evidence for this unfair treatment, that scarcely causes a pause. If there is no evidence, then there must be “covert” discrimination, a “glass ceiling” or some other elusive and sinister influence that you cannot substantiate. This kind of circular reasoning says, in effect, “Heads I win and tails you lose.”

Politically, there are few ideas more potent than the notion that all your problems are caused by other people and their unfairness to you. That notion was the royal road to unbridled power for Hitler, Lenin, Mao and Pol Pot—which is to say millions of human beings paid with their lives for believing it.

The unfairness that these demagogues talked about was not a myth. Nothing is easier than finding examples of unfair treatment among human beings.

The fatal misstep is in assuming that such unfairness can be presumed whenever results are unequal. For the truly clever, unfairness is simply defined as anything producing unequal results or unequal prospects.

To those with this mind-set, if individuals' "life chances" are unequal, then that is unfair. This might be an interesting argument if you were filing a class-action lawsuit against God, but it is idiocy when trying to hold any given human being responsible for a whole galaxy of complex interactions beyond the control of anyone made of flesh and blood.

When we confuse the vagaries of fate with the sins of man and look for "leaders" to redress this unfairness, we are setting ourselves up to become dupes of those who know how to arouse emotions and promise the impossible. That lesson is written in blood across the history of the 20th century.

- Any serious study of geography alone would show the utter unrealism of expecting people whose histories and cultures evolved in very different physical settings to have the same skills and experiences.

- How could the peoples living in the Himalayas have developed the same seafaring skills as people living in the Greek islands? How could the Eskimos have learned to grow pineapples?

These are just some of the more-obvious geographic sources of unequal results—and geography is just one of many influences on our ability to create wealth or do the thousands of other things which influence our "life chances." First-born children average higher IQs than later children. Technology makes some people's jobs obsolete and opens up great opportunities for others.

The unfairness of other people is just one more item on this very long list.

How many are interested in the unfairness that has made us so much more fortunate than people in previous centuries?

If the average American of today could be transported back over the centuries and become a nobleman in the Middle Ages, that would produce a reduced standard of living and a shorter life span. Maybe that is a reason to count our blessings instead of our grievances.