

The Politics and Sentimentality of Descent



Ernie Caffrey and his daughter Miriam Caffrey present President Joe Biden with a brick from the fireplace of the Blewitt family homestead as he visits the North Mayo Heritage Center in County Mayo, Ireland.

by Theodore Dalrymple

The emphasis President Joe Biden places on his Irishness is simultaneously bogus and sincere: for it is a strange fact of human psychology that if you repeat something to yourself often enough you come to believe that it must be true, especially if it's to your advantage, and then you begin to have the feelings that would be associated with the belief if it were true.

The president is of English as well as Irish descent, which in itself is not surprising, for it's a very common mixture. It's said that about a quarter of the English have some Irish descent—or "blood," as the president would put it in his unintentionally fascistic way.

The belief that distant descent confers psychological characteristics and moral qualities is one with a rather unfortunate history—besides being merely false, of course. But it's a tool in the hands of politicians for whom all is good that conduces to power.

The president appears to believe that there's some inherent superiority of his Irish ancestry to his English that is mysteriously transmitted down the generations—a genetic goodness that has somehow overpowered his English badness.

By happy coincidence, this accords with his electoral interests, for there's a distinct voting bloc to be appealed to in a way that Trump, for example, could not appeal to Scottish Americans, though he's more Scottish than Biden is Irish. Moreover, by emphasizing his Irishness, Biden is implicitly or subliminally claiming some kind of victim status by apostolic succession, as it were: If my great grandfather was victimized, he seems to imply, then I, too, partake of that victimization and am thus worthy of sympathy and special moral consideration.

This is sentimental drivel. All four of my grandparents were refugees, my mother was a refugee, and her sister was a refugee twice by the age of 42. I, however, have never been victimized or persecuted, except by my own foolishness, and therefore I have no special moral standing, nor do I deserve consideration from others because of my descent.

The president is not alone in sentimentalizing his descent: With considerably more plausibility, President Barack Obama emphasized his blackness, and is often now described as being

black. But this, no doubt unintentionally, is profoundly racist. I won't quote the old and terrible Texan proverb, but to disregard completely the fact that Obama is as much white as he is black is some kind of confirmation of that proverb. To call him black is to accept that to be white is to possess *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood), while to be black, any old mixture suffices and will do.

If I have understood his biography correctly, Obama owes at least as much personally to his white heritage as to his black, but of course there would have been little advantage, politically or electorally, to emphasizing it.

The South Africans under apartheid were actually more honest, or at least more brutally frank, than modern-day Americans in this matter. They would have called Obama colored, not black. The difference is that they would have prevented him, not merely informally but by law, from rising in the ranks above a certain level: a level higher than that reachable by blacks, but below what was reachable by whites.

From our current perspective, this all seems to have been not only evil, but madness. However, madness is more easily suppressed than cured, and waits to burst forth once again, though not necessarily in exactly the same form. In many respects, it has already burst forth, and Western society seems sometimes as obsessed by race as was South Africa. We are still far from judging people by the content of their character rather than their membership of this or that demographic group.

While this is so, it will always be tempting for politicians in an electoral system to appeal to groups by means of their own descent, and it's easier to make such an appeal if you believe yourself to be a member of such a group, and furthermore that such membership is morally, psychologically, and politically important or relevant. And it's only natural for politicians to claim the descent that they think will give

them the most votes.

This, alas, is more or less a guarantee of moral and intellectual dishonesty, and an invitation to the grossest sentimentality.

Before the French election in 1965, which he lost, the late President François Mitterrand claimed to have been the son of a railwayman. The intended implication was that, as leader of the Socialists, he was a son of horny-handed labor, but he was nothing of the sort. His father had been the stationmaster of a very large and important station, a highly responsible job, and rose in the ranks of the railway company, which he left when Mitterrand was aged 3 in order to enter the family business. Mitterrand desisted from the lie about his origins only when his brothers demanded that he did so and threatened to expose him as a liar.

If Mitterrand had been the son of horny-handed labor, what relevance would that have had for his candidacy? It might have made him more sympathetic to the demands of the common man, but it might equally have made him even more eager to escape his origins by siding with, and joining, the upper classes, as many of those who have risen from the lower classes have done. Likewise, plenty of rich people have become tribunes of the poor, disregarding their own interests or those of their class. In fact, Mitterrand's whole career was one of totally unscrupulous opportunism and betrayal. The man who abolished the death penalty in France, for example, was also the Minister of Justice who signed more death warrants than any other minister for a century and a half.

It was his character, not his origins, that counted, and this ought to be so in all elections. Those candidates who sentimentally recall their origins, near or distant, are appealing to the most primitive of allegiances and the worst of criteria for making a choice between rivals for office. No doubt this is to an extent inevitable, because it appeals to

human nature rather than to human reason, but it should nevertheless count as a mark against them. We sometimes have to resist what comes most naturally to us.

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