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Notes on the Political Psychology of Redistribution

CONSIDER THIS: A PERSON TOWARD WHOM YOU ARE NOT ILL DISPOSED asks you to do something for him that you do not have to do. Responding to the request requires effort, but it is not massively burdensome. You do it willingly. This is followed by another modest request from the same person. Again you comply. A third request follows. You do it again, but now you start to become grumpy. After several more requests, with which you comply with diminishing good cheer, you conclude that no matter how many times you do what is asked, the requests will not stop. At that point you tune the person out. You stop returning phone calls and avoid him.

Now consider this: in his first presidential debate with Al Gore in October 2000, George W. Bush said: “Look, this is a man who has great numbers. I’m beginning to think not only did he invent the Internet, but he invented the calculator. It’s fuzzy math. It’s a scaring—he’s trying to scare people in the voting booth. Under my tax plan that he continues to criticize, I set one-third. The federal government should take no more than a third of anybody’s check”¹

These anecdotes can usefully inform our thinking about two types of constraint on the demands people are willing to regard as legitimate: frequency and size. Part of what becomes irksome in the first example is the realization that no matter what you do, the demands will not stop—even though each individual demand is concededly modest. In

the second example, Bush never supplied any reason for picking a third other than simplicity. Presumably, his position reflected his own judgment, or more likely Frank Luntz's, that "no more than a third" would resonate with people's sense of unfairness. By advertising clear limits on the demands they plan to make of taxpayers, politicians recognize that finitude is important to people. Without limits on their obligations, voters will likely balk.

My first story is most relevant to thinking about the relations between the sense of unfairness and injustice in low-enforcement tax regimes. In high-enforcement regimes other factors, such as fear of prosecution, may increase compliance with demands for payment. As people become increasingly convinced that what they are being asked for is unfair or unreasonable—or if it otherwise antagonizes them—they may be more inclined to risk defiance. Governments have compliance tables reflecting this: as marginal tax rates increase, so does tax avoidance (the search for legal shelters) and evasion (illegal noncompliance). But in low-enforcement regimes, such as the international system, little more than the perceived legitimacy of the demand motivates compliance. The operation of low-enforcement regimes is therefore most likely to illuminate peoples' underlying conceptions of fairness and unfairness.

One source of illumination about low-enforcement regimes comes from the history of tithing. There have been periods of forcible collections of tithes, but these were haphazard and intermittent, usually by institutions of limited coercive capacity.² For the most part tithes were voluntary, gathered by the use of moral suasion or at most the threat of ostracism from the Church.³ There have been instances in which tithes resembled conventional taxation, usually when the Church assumed quasi-governmental functions,⁴ but for the most part tithes were justified as what is owed to God, not to Caesar. Numerous biblical references make it clear that the obligation to tithe is the obligation to give God his due—usually in recognition of the bounty he has bestowed on us.⁵

Tithing has thus typically been constrained by what people will accept as right, as distinct from what they can be coerced to pay or

can be persuaded that they should agree to pay as part of the social contract to provide for the collective good or their future security. As this formulation suggests, tithing is not done in anticipation of a tangible benefit—at least not in this life. People might tithe partly to garner approval, and avoid disapproval, among relevant peers. In that case their perception of what is right will be shaped by collective norms.

One remarkable fact about the tithe is its stability as a tenth, from which the term is derived, over exceedingly long periods of time.⁶ Most tithes have been linked in some discernible way to the idea of a tenth, regardless of which particular forms of income or wealth were considered titheable, or whether they might be spread out over different periods—as when each of three different tithes was due every third year.⁷ Notably, the amount of the tithe is not reckoned by reference to any particular need for revenue, but rather the obligation to give away a tenth of one's income or "increase" in the value of land or other assets.⁸

There has been no systematic study of historical variation in the size of tithes, but anecdotal evidence suggests that attempts to increase them significantly above a tenth breed resentment and resistance.⁹ This judgment is psychological, not philosophical. Apart from invocations of biblical authority, I have not uncovered anything approaching an argument or theory about why a tenth is the right amount to tithe. The durability of the proportion suggests that a tenth was a limit on what people have historically been willing to accept as their obligation to give in low-enforcement regimes.

Notice that this does not distinguish beliefs about tithing from those about taxation. Bush said nothing about *why* no one should give more than one-third or what the theory is that gets him to that proportion rather than a quarter or 40 percent. It is a rough and ready judgment about what will resonate in the present US enforcement regime. (Some might speculate that it has less to do with the enforcement regime and more to do with the fact that people expect to receive services in return for taxation, whereas tithing is not done in expectation of a tangible benefit. However, the evidence suggests that people

only factor anticipated benefits into their feelings about the fairness of taxes when explicitly prompted to do so. Thus, when polled simply on the fairness of the estate tax, over two-thirds of Americans say that it is an unfair tax that should be eliminated, whereas explicitly linking repeal to the elimination of popular services causes support for elimination to evaporate; see Graetz and Shapiro, 2005: 118-30).

The reactive character of such judgments calls to mind arguments one has with a publisher about whether pricing a book at \$25 or \$30 is “too much,” or the faculty member who ran up a \$3,000 phone bill for professional calls in a month and was told by his department chair that “there’s no maximum, and this is way above it.”¹⁰ We are dealing here with visceral judgments about what people will not accept rather than well-developed theories. It is doubtful that any politician, let alone any voter, could articulate a theory of just taxation or charitable giving. Sure as they might be, on passing some threshold, about what constitutes too much, they could not tell you a coherent story about what is the “right” amount and why.

One signal of the reactive character of responses to expectations about giving is that they are frequently cast in negative terms: no more than a tenth; no more than a third. People often have much better developed ideas of what they are against than what they favor. This is true in many domains, not just taxation. Those who fight for democracy, for example, typically define their goals reactively. Sure as they are about the fine details of what they are against, they are less clear about the texture of what they hope to create. The French revolutionaries had a good sense of why *l’ancien régime* should be destroyed; they knew little of what a world in which *liberté, égalité, et fraternité* reigned supreme might actually be like. Their American counterparts discoursed with alacrity on imperial injustice, but they and their successors argued for decades—even fought a civil war—over how their indigenous democratic institutions should be structured. The Russian revolutionaries in 1917 may have thought they had a better blueprint for a utopian people’s democracy; but they were wrong. Efficacious as the dictatorship of the proletariat was at destroying czarist Russia, it quickly atro-

phied into the dictatorship of the vanguard party over the proletariat. In our own era democratic ideals have also been forged out of opposition ideologies. In the revolutions since 1989, demands for democracy had little to do with well-thought-out plans for the future political order. More often they have been placeholders for what people believed they had hitherto been denied. In South Africa, for instance, those who fought for democracy identified it in the first instance with apartheid's abolition. What it might mean beyond this only began to come dimly into view as the old order was displaced; in many respects it remains an open question more than a decade after the National Party regime began crumbling at the end of the 1980s.¹¹

A LOOK AT PATTERNS OF CHARITABLE GIVING IN THE UNITED STATES reveals that few give as much as a tenth. Interestingly, there is an inverse relationship between income and charitable giving whereby lower-income earners give away a larger share of their income than those who earn more. Thus, people earning less than \$25,000 a year contribute an average of 4.2 percent of household income to charity. This falls to 3 percent for incomes from \$25,000 to \$75,000, and to 2.7 percent for incomes above that (Independent Sector, 2001: 30-31). (In fact this understates the difference since fewer taxpayers earning less than \$25,000 get the tax benefits of itemized deductions) (Independent Sector, 2003: 15-16). How do we account for this? An economist might think of charitable giving as a form of consumption, explaining the pattern as reflecting the diminishing marginal propensity to consume. Alternatively, it may be that people think of appropriate giving in terms of absolute sums rather than proportions of their income.

I suspect that the giving patterns of wealthy taxpayers follow a quite different psychological logic than even a secularized understanding of tithing. Wealthy individuals give overwhelmingly to wealthy institutions. This suggests that they are really purchasing a tangible benefit such as status, or an endowed building or professorship in their name—really a form of consumption in a different and stronger sense

than giving to satisfy one's religious convictions is a form of consumption.

The data on giving make it clear that few people give anything approaching a tenth of their income or wealth to charitable causes. This is reflected in the aggregate statistics as well: since 1980, charitable giving has seldom risen above 2 percent of GDP. The all-time high was 2.3 percent of GDP in 2000 (American Association of Fundraising Council Trust, 2004). If people in principle might accept that a tenth is what they should give, they are under-delivering significantly.¹²

This under-delivery mentioned might be accounted for by the fact that people assume significant amounts of their taxes are being given away by the government for charitable purposes (as distinct from funding services and public goods for taxpayers). The most obvious example concerns beliefs about foreign aid, which Americans vastly overestimate. Less than 1 percent of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid, a number that is correctly guessed by fewer than 2 percent of the population. Sixty percent believe that more than 10 percent is given in foreign aid; 45 percent believe that more than 20 percent is given; 30 percent believe that more than 30 percent is given; 20 percent believe that more than 40 percent is given; and 14 percent believe that more than 50 percent is given (*Survey by Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, German Marshall Fund, and Harris Interactive, 2002*).

The exaggerated beliefs about foreign aid color Americans' visceral hostility to it. Surveys reveal that between half and two-thirds of the population believes that the United States spends too much on foreign aid.¹³ Yet when asked what the appropriate amount *would* be, only 13 percent support giving less than 1 percent—the actual amount. Twelve percent of the population say between 1 and 3 percent should be given; 11 percent of the population support giving between 4 and 6 percent; 19 percent of the population support giving between 7 and 10 percent; 13 percent of the population support giving between 11 and 20 percent; 8 percent of the population support giving between 21 and 30 percent. An additional 14 percent of the population support giving even more (*Survey by Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, German*

Marshall Fund and Harris Interactive, 2002). Perhaps people would revise these numbers downward somewhat when apprised of the opportunity costs in terms of goods and services they care about that would have to be forgone, but it is notable that 54 percent support giving at least in the range of 7 to 10 percent, which is comparable to the traditional tithe when their personal giving is factored in, and 65 percent support giving at least 4 to 6 percent—a quintupling of current rates. Even a significant downward recalibration would leave significant room for increasing foreign aid.

Conjecture: An obstacle to significantly expanding public support for international aid is that the literature advocating this follows the logic alluded to at the beginning of this essay more closely than it does the logic of the tithe. If one reads the philosophical literature on international obligations and distributive justice, it is substantially preoccupied with debating the fine points of different forms of global egalitarianism, *all* of which would make such massive demands on populations in the wealthy countries that most people are more likely to tune them out than engage in even partial compliance. Whether it is global utilitarian schemes designed to show that redistribution to equality will maximize overall utility due to the diminishing marginal utility of money, or resourcist egalitarians extending Rawls's intuitions on a global scale, the implication is clear: justice requires massive and quite possibly continuing redistribution from inhabitants of wealthy countries to inhabitants of poor ones.¹⁴ But what are we to make of theories of justice with which people are incapable of living?

Millennia of experience seem to suggest that people are willing to recognize and act on substantial obligations to others. Yet people also seem to need to know that their obligations can be kept within manageable limits, and that they can be discharged without swamping their other projects. Trying to take account of this reality—if, indeed, it is a reality—in our theorizing about global redistribution might seem conservative at first sight. Yet developing arguments that take account of it might lead to substantial increases in global redistribution. At a minimum that possibility seems worth exploring.

NOTES

1. See <<http://www.debates.org/pages/trans2000a.html>>.
2. France was the first country to enact secular laws requiring the payment of tithes. Payment was to be made to individual churches, with the clergy responsible for enforcement. If one refused to pay, the first step in enforcement was warnings, followed by exclusion from the church, followed by fines, house arrest, and imprisonment. The Council of Rouen in 630 AD laid out specific penalties for the enforcement of tithes: three admonishments followed by a pronouncement of anathema until the debt was resolved. Under Louis the Simple, in 829 AD, there were several levels of enforcement: first priestly admonition, followed by exclusion from the church, followed by the involvement of civil authorities and fines, followed by house arrest, and finally followed by imprisonment (Selborne, 1888: 49, 53-54). In England circa 878 AD, fines were used to enforce the tithe. Later, circa 967 AD, if one failed to pay tithes entirely, the bishop, the king's officer, and the parish priest were entitled to take 9/10 of the offender's income—a law that was maintained until at least 1100 AD. In 1236 AD, the archbishop of Canterbury allowed parish priests to deny the sacrament at Easter to those who did not pay tithes (Lansdell, 1906: 258-9, 262-3). In England circa 1150, the Church used excommunication and pronouncements of anathema as punishments for one's refusal to pay tithes (Clarke, 1894: 33-34; 133). Circa 1798, tithes were enforced in an inconsistent manner in Ireland and England. The clergy was ultimately responsible for their collection, though it often employed proctors to carry out the actual collection. In Ireland, punishments at this time could be as extreme as seizure of property or execution. See *An Enquiry into the history of tithe, its influence upon the agricultural, population and morals of Ireland* (1808: 50-53).
3. Excommunication and anathema (along with occasional imprisonment) seem to have been the most common punishments for the refusal to pay tithes; see Clarke (1894: 133); Lansdell (1906: 233); Selborne (1888: 53-54); Swan (1837).
4. After the English Reformation, lines between the Church of England

and the state blurred considerably, with tithes essentially becoming a tax on rent or income, which the state disbursed as it saw fit and which the state used to support the Church. See Clarke (1894). This was also true of the ancient Egyptians; they paid taxes to the pharaoh, who in turn supported the priests. See Lansdell (1906: 1-8). In addition, a Muslim would ideally pay zakat, the Islamic equivalent of a tithe, to an organization within the Islamic government in which they lived. See Monzer (1997: 28-39).

5. Some relevant passages include: Samuel 8:10-18, Numbers 28:20-40, Genesis 14:18-20, Genesis 28:18-22, Leviticus 27:30-33, Deuteronomy 14:22-27, Deuteronomy 14:28-29, and Deuteronomy 26:12-13; Boase (1865: 2-34).



6. Early ME. *tiee*, *tie*, ME. *te*, *te* = OE. *teooa*, *téoa*, forms of the numeral TENTH which as a noun acquired a specialized sense, in which this form has been retained, while the adjective has become *tenth*. For the general sense- and form-history see *tenth* A. 1, , B. 1. Cf. also *teind*, the specialized northern form. See “Tithe” (1989).
7. In biblical times the Israelites paid three separate tithes. The first and second, both paid annually, were a tenth of the produce of the land and the entire increase of the land, respectively. The third was a tenth of every third year’s income, which was kept by the individual to be distributed to the poor. Lansdell (1906: 55-68).
8. For example, the biblical tithes already mentioned, the English tithes prior to the Reformation mentioned in previous footnotes, and many of the tithes in mainland Europe. Lansdell (1906: 227-245).
9. For example, in 1389 the citizenry of London was reportedly angered when the archbishop of Canterbury increased the required tithe payments from roughly 11.5 percent or an individual’s yearly rent to 16.5 percent. Citizens were said to consider this increase a cheat or a fraud; Clarke (1894: 186-188). Tithes may have been one source of the Irish rebellion in 1798-part of the rebels’ goal was to abolish tithes completely. This might have stemmed from the uneven application of tithes; for rich lands the tithe could be as little as a fifth, but for poor lands it may have been around one-half. Tithes were said to have been

- a “powerful cause” of many quitting the Church. *An Enquiry into the history of tithes* (1808: 10, 44, 52).
10. I was the chair in question. When I enquired of administrators why we did not set an explicit limit, the answer was that the relationship between the mean and median use was such that it would be more expensive to set a limit based on what key people would accept, since this would then become a target for others who would feel that they were losing out if they did not consume their allotted quota.
 11. This paragraph draws on Shapiro (1992): 1-2.
 12. Nor would factoring in religious giving (as particularly close to the idea of tithing) make much difference. About half of all charitable giving goes to religious causes. Independent Sector (2003: 16-19).
 13. *Survey by Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation* (2004); *Survey by Gallup Organization* (2002, 2004); *Survey by Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation* (2002a, 2002b, 2003).
 14. For a sampling, see Fishkin (1983); Beitz (1989); Kagan (1991); Singer (2004). For additional examples of the extent to which this literature is preoccupied with questions three points to the right of the egalitarian decimal, see the papers in Beitz (1985) and Shapiro and Brilmayer (1999).

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