

An economic vision with a ray of hope

Alex Mikulich | Dec. 19, 2011



President Barack Obama speaks during a visit to Osawatimie High School in Kansas Dec. 6. (Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

ANALYSIS

President Barack Obama's Dec. 6 speech in Osawatimie, Kan. -- where Teddy Roosevelt gave his "New Nationalism" speech in 1910 -- marks a defining moment in this presidency. The speech offers a moral framework -- resonant with Catholic social teaching -- that names the absurdity that seems to rule national politics.

One of the signs of our time is its absurdity -- most evident, perhaps, when the most privileged economic and political interests in the nation call the president's economic speech a "continuation of class warfare."

People who stand for economic justice ought to turn such redbaiting on its head and name it what it is -- hypocrisy. The same voices calling the president's economic vision "class warfare" or "socialist" themselves stand for a preferential option for the top 1 percent -- in the form of extending Bush-era tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans -- as they refuse to lift a finger for millions of Americans who are jobless, underemployed or straining to make ends meet.

In their respective Kansas speeches, both Roosevelt and Obama outlined a moral vision for the economy remarkably coherent with Catholic social teaching. Consider each of these Catholic social teaching principles in this order: 1) The economy ought to serve people, not profits; 2) labor must take priority over capital; and 3) property must serve the common good.

Although Roosevelt was a Republican son of a wealthy family, notice how he defined a true conservative.

"The true friend of property, the true conservative," Roosevelt said, "is he who insists that property shall be the servant and not the master of the commonwealth; who insists that the creature of man's making shall be the servant and not the master of the man who made it." He continued, "The citizens of the United States must effectively control the mighty commercial forces which they have called into being."

At least upon this principle, Roosevelt sounds like a conservative who would be at home with Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, calling for a global economic order at the service of people, not profits.

Obama echoed this point in his Kansas speech, noting that markets don't take care of everyone, that more deregulation and tax cuts for the wealthy do not "trickle down to everyone else." To the contrary, the president argued, expensive tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans in 2001 and 2003 resulted in slower job growth and produced deficits that have prevented investment in things "like education and infrastructure, science and technology, Medicare and Social Security."

Second, take the priority of labor over capital. A fun way to test knowledge of Catholic social teaching is to identify major quotes without titles and authors. For example, who said: "Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor has not first existed. Labor is superior of capital, and deserves the much the higher consideration."

Is this quote from Pope Leo XIII or Pope John Paul II? Neither. It is Teddy Roosevelt quoting President Abraham Lincoln in order to fend off economic elites of his day who called Roosevelt a socialist, not unlike the redbaiting we hear from libertarians today.

Obama recalled how Roosevelt fought his last campaign for an eight-hour workday; a minimum wage for women; insurance for the unemployed, the elderly and those with disabilities; and a progressive income tax. These policies helped to distribute economic prosperity more widely and cushioned the blows of economic downturns for the most vulnerable Americans.

Finally, consider Catholic social teaching's principle that property ought to serve the common good. This principle underscores the previous two. Applying this principle is critical at a time in which the nation is acting more like a plutocracy than a democracy.

Today, I think we need to surpass Roosevelt's concern about the poisoning influence of privileged interests. He noted the historic "conflict between the men who possess more than they have earned and the men who have earned more than they possess." The way to contend with this struggle, Roosevelt continued, was to "equalize opportunity, destroy privilege, and give to the life and citizenship of every individual the highest possible value both to himself and the commonwealth." Repeat that -- "destroy privilege"!

Echoing Roosevelt's concern, Obama laments how widening wealth and income inequality "hurts us all," socially and economically. More importantly, Obama stressed how wealthy interests are "selling our democracy to the highest bidder," eroding any trust in elected officials, and crushing economic opportunity for most Americans.

Of course, Catholic social teaching offers a deeper vision of economic justice that integrates other principles like subsidiarity, the preferential option for the poor, and authentic human development. Nonetheless, Obama's economic speech is one that people of faith and justice ought to utilize as we reflect on, debate and practice the responsibilities of faithful citizenship in 2012.

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