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Frank Capra's America and Ours

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered at Hillsdale College on March 3, 2015, during a conference on the films of Frank Capra sponsored by the College's Center for Constructive Alternatives.

Filmmaker Frank Capra was not an American by birth or blood. Consequently he did not understand America, as many Americans do today, in terms of personal categories of identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. He understood America in terms of its political principles—the moral principles of America that can be shared by all who understand them and are willing to live up to them. This was Abraham Lincoln's understanding as well. In a speech in Chicago in 1858, Lincoln noted that many citizens of that time did not share the blood of the "old men" of America's Founding generation. But, he continued,

... when they look through the old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that

day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principles in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.

Frank Capra was born in Sicily in 1897 and came to America in 1903. Yet by the 1930s, his movies—movies like *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Meet John Doe*—were said to embody the best in America. Capra’s films were nominated for 35 Academy Awards and won eight, including two for best picture and three for best director. But Capra’s star faded after the Second World War, and by the end of the revolutionary decade of the 1960s, the actor and director John Cassavettes could say: “Maybe there never was an America in the thirties. Maybe it was all Frank Capra.” By that time, Capra’s films were widely viewed as feel-good fantasies about a country that never was. But is that view correct?

Capra, like Lincoln, believed that our inherited political edifice of liberty and equal rights is a fundamental good. He believed that if our treasure is in the ideas of our

fathers, it is the duty of each generation to make those ideas live through the proper kind of education—including through literature and art, including his own art of filmmaking. Accordingly, he believed it is important to celebrate the deeds of those ordinary individuals who continue to exercise the virtues necessary to maintain those ideas.

In celebrating these deeds in his movies, Capra rejected social or economic theories based on progressivism or historicism—theories in which the idea of natural right is replaced with struggles for power based on categories such as race and class. Such theories had taken root not only in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, but elsewhere in the West—especially in the universities. As political theorist Hannah Arendt observed during World War II:

Among ideologies few have won enough prominence to survive the hard competitive struggle of persuasion, and only two have come out on top and essentially defeated all others: the ideology which interprets history as an economic struggle of classes, and the other that interprets history as a natural fight of races. The appeal of both to large masses was so strong that they were able to obtain state support and establish themselves as official national doctrines. But far beyond the boundaries in which race-thinking and class-thinking have developed into

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[Latin]: in the first place

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obligatory patterns of thought, free public opinion has adopted them to such an extent that not only intellectuals but great masses of people will no longer accept any presentation of past or present facts that is not in agreement with these views.

It is not surprising, then, that Capra's films came to be viewed by critics, especially after the 1960s, through the lens of those economic or social theories.

* * *

Capra was often thought to be a populist. But Capra did not assume that a virtuous opinion existed in the people, or that the people simply needed mobilizing. He was aware that the modern public is created by modern mass media whose techniques spawn mass society, posing a danger to individual freedom. Capra wrote that his films "embodied the rebellious cry of the individual against being trampled into an orb by massiveness—mass production, mass thought, mass education, mass politics, mass wealth, mass conformity." He did not believe in the use of mass power to improve society or to right historical wrongs. Reform, he thought, must take place through moral regeneration—thus through moral education.

Consider Capra's 1939 film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, in which an idealistic man goes to Congress, runs into rampant corruption, becomes despondent, is later inspired at the Lincoln Memorial, decides against hope to stand on principle, and prevails. Capra had doubts about making *Mr. Smith*. While in Washington preparing for the film, he attended a press conference in which President Roosevelt outlined the great problems facing the nation. Capra wondered whether it was a good time to make a dramatic comedy about Washington

politics. In his troubled state he visited the Lincoln Memorial, where he saw a boy reading Lincoln's words to an elderly man. He decided, he later wrote, that he "must make the film, if only to hear a boy read Lincoln to his grandpa." He left the Lincoln Memorial that day, he recalled,

with this growing conviction about our film: The more uncertain are the people of the world . . . the more they need a ringing statement of America's democratic ideals. The soul of our film would be anchored in Lincoln. Our Jefferson Smith [the film's lead character, played by Jimmy Stewart] would be a young Abe Lincoln, tailored to the rail-splitter's simplicity, compassion, ideals, humor. . . . It is *never* untimely to yank the rope of freedom's bell.

When watching *Mr. Smith*, it is important to notice where Capra locates the corruption. FDR customarily attacked "economic royalists," or the private corruption of corporations and monopolies. For FDR, the solution to corruption was to be found through the government and through the unions, which would combat the economic forces of the private sphere. But in *Mr. Smith*, Capra located the corruption not in the private but in the political sphere—it was the politicians who had usurped the institutions of government on behalf of their own interests and the special interests. When Smith goes to Washington he reveres a Senator from his state who had been a friend of his father. Smith's father, a newspaperman, had been killed while defending an independent prospector against a mining syndicate that was likely in cahoots with the union. Capra, like Smith and his father, understood America in terms of a *common* good—a good established by the principles of equality and liberty as the foundation of *individual* rights.

The setting of *Mr. Smith* is deliberately timeless. There is no mention of the Depression or of impending war. There is no indication of partisanship. What Capra hopes to bring to life are the words that have been carved in stone on Washington, D.C.'s monuments, but which are now forgotten. That is Jefferson Smith's purpose as well. In a central scene in the movie, gazing at the lighted dome of the Capitol, Smith says:

. . . boys forget what their country means by just reading "the land of the free" in history books. Then they get to be men, they forget even more. Liberty is too precious a thing to be buried in books. . . . Men should hold it up in front of them every single day . . . and say, "I'm free to think and to speak. My ancestors couldn't. I can. And my children will."

What Smith is advocating in the film is the establishment of a boys camp that will teach them about the principles of their country. Moreover, it is not to be paid for by the taxpayers, but with a loan from the government to be paid for by the boys themselves. At the climax of Smith's battle in the Senate, he says this:

Get up there with that lady that's up on top of this Capitol dome—that lady that stands for liberty. Take a look at this country through her eyes. . . . You won't just see scenery. You'll see. . . what man's carved out for himself after centuries of fighting. . . for something better than just jungle law—fighting so he can stand on his own two feet, free and decent—like he was created, no matter what his race, color, or creed. That's what you'd see. There's no place out there for graft or greed or lies—or compromise with human liberties. And if that's

what the grown-ups have done with this world that was given to them, then we better get those boys camps started fast and see what the kids can do. It's not too late. . . . *Great principles don't get lost once they come to light. They're right here. You just have to see them again.*

For Capra, like Lincoln, the problem is how to make people see the principles again.

The politicians in Washington in 1939 did not like their portrayal in *Mr. Smith*. Many tried to keep the movie from being shown. Capra thought it to be a ringing defense of democracy—and the people agreed. It was a tremendous success, not only in America, but throughout the world. In 1942, a month before the Nazi occupation of France was to begin, the Vichy government asked the French people what films they wanted to see before American and British films were banned by the Germans. The great majority wanted to see *Mr. Smith*. One theater in Paris played the movie for 30 straight nights.

* * *

By the time America entered World War II, Capra had become America's most popular director and was president of the Screen Directors Guild. Yet four days after Pearl Harbor he left Hollywood to join the Armed Forces. He was sent to Washington and was given an office next to the Army Chief of Staff, General George Marshall. Marshall was worried that millions of men would be conscripted, many right off of the farm, having little idea of the reason for the war. He assigned Capra to make "a series of documented, factual-information films—the first in our history—that will explain to our boys in the Army *why* we are fighting, and the *principles* for which we are fighting." Capra was nearly cowed by the assignment.

He had never made a documentary. But after giving it some thought, he brilliantly dramatized the difference between the countries at war by using their own films and documentaries, in this way illustrating the character and danger of tyranny.

After the war, with the danger gone, it became increasingly clear that American intellectuals, who had rejected the political principles of the American Founding, had not understood the phenomenon of tyranny. For them, it was simply historical conditions that had established the distinction between right and wrong—or between friend and enemy—during the war. For them, in fighting the Nazis, America had simply been fighting a social movement. Subsequently, they looked on those who still revered America’s Founding principles as representing a reactionary economic and social movement to be opposed here at home. For the same reason, Capra’s wartime documentaries—known collectively as *Why We Fight*—came to be seen merely as propaganda.

Capra never thought of his documentaries as propaganda. He saw them as recognizing the permanent human problems—those problems that reveal the distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, justice and injustice. The fundamental distinction in politics is between freedom and slavery or democracy and tyranny. Winston Churchill said of Capra’s wartime documentaries, “I have never seen or read any more powerful statement of our cause or of our rightful case against the Nazi tyranny.” In his view, they were not propaganda at all. Churchill insisted that they be shown to every British soldier and in every theater in England. At the end of the war in 1945, General Marshall awarded Capra the Distinguished Service Medal. And on Churchill’s recommendation, Capra was awarded the Order of the British Empire Medal in 1962.

* * *

Capra’s last great movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, was made in 1946. Shortly before making it, he said, “There are just two things that are important. One is to strengthen the individual’s belief in himself, and the other, even more important right now, is to combat a modern trend toward atheism.” This movie, he wrote, summed up his philosophy of filmmaking: “First, to exalt the worth of the individual; to champion man—plead his causes, protest any degradation of his dignity, spirit or divinity.” Capra understood that Hollywood would be changing, because the culture and society had begun to change. The historical and personal categories of class and race had become political, and self-expression and self-indulgence had replaced those civic virtues that require self-restraint. In his 1971 autobiography—imagine what he would think today—he wrote that “practically all the Hollywood filmmaking of today is stooping to cheap salacious pornography in a crazy bastardization of a great art to compete for the ‘patronage’ of deviates.”

In 1982, when he was in his 85th year, Capra was awarded the American Film Institute’s Life Achievement Award. In his acceptance speech, he touched on the things that had been most important in his life. He spoke of celebrating his sixth birthday in steerage on a 13-day voyage across the Atlantic. He recalled the lack of privacy and ventilation, and the terrible smell. But he also remembered the ship’s arrival in New York Harbor, when his father brought him on deck and showed him the Statue of Liberty: “Cicco look!” his illiterate peasant father had said. “Look at that! That’s the greatest light since the star of Bethlehem! That’s the light of freedom! Remember that. Freedom.” Capra remembered. In his speech to the Hollywood elite so many years later, he revealed his formula

for moviemaking. He said: “The art of Frank Capra is very, very simple. It’s the love of people. Add two simple ideals to this love of people—the freedom of each individual and the equal importance of each individual—and you have the principle upon which I based all my films.”

It is hard to think of a better way to describe Frank Capra’s view of the world, and America’s place in fulfilling its purpose, than to turn to another great American who made his living in the world of motion pictures. Ronald Reagan was a friend and admirer of Frank Capra. They were very much alike. The inscription that Reagan had carved on his tombstone could have been written by Capra: “I know in my heart that man is good. That what is right will always eventually triumph. And there is purpose and worth to each and every life.” Both Capra and Reagan looked to a benevolent and enduring Providence, and the best in man’s nature, as the ultimate grounds of political right. For them, as for Lincoln, America was more than a geographical location or a place where citizens shared a common blood or religion, or belonged to a common culture or tradition. America was a place where an enlightened understanding of “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” had made it possible to establish those principles of civil and religious liberty that gave “purpose and worth to each and every life.”

Capra was aware that the moral foundations established by those principles, as well as belief in God, had become endangered by the transformations in American life following World War II. He saw the necessity of reviving the moral education necessary to preserve the conditions of freedom, because he understood that in a democracy, the people must not only participate in the

rule of others, they must also learn to govern themselves.

In his last and most personal tribute to his adopted country, Capra recalled his family’s arrival at Union Station in Los Angeles after their long journey across America in 1903. When they got off the train, his mother and father got on their knees and kissed the ground. Capra’s last words to his assembled audience were these: “For America, for just allowing me to live here, I kiss the ground.” Capra did not believe that he had a right to be a citizen of America. Rather he was grateful for the privilege of living in America. He understood that freedom not only offers economic opportunity, but establishes a duty for all citizens—a duty to preserve the conditions of freedom not only for themselves, but for their posterity. Only those willing to bear the burdens of freedom have a right to its rewards.

For Capra, the real America was to be understood in terms of its virtues, which are derived from its principles. In his view, his art was dedicated to keeping those virtues alive—by making those principles live again in the speeches and deeds of that most uncommon phenomenon of human history, the American common man. It was the simple, unsophisticated, small-town common American that Capra celebrated in his films. But for Capra, as for his friend John Ford, no one epitomized this phenomenon better than Abraham Lincoln.

For American elites today, and for too many of the American people as well, the past has come to seem no longer meaningful to the present, and the celebration of the heroes of the past, like

Lincoln, has come to seem naïve. Looking ahead, I’m afraid, the moral regeneration of America that Capra had hoped to bring about will require more than a Capra. It will require a Lincoln. ■



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