



Ethical Action Report

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Welcome to the Ethical Action Report 2.0

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Friend of the Ethical Society of St. Louis

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Member, Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia

Solidarity and Activism After Ferguson - Ember Assington
Friend of the Ethical Society of St. Louis

On Monday October 20, I took part in the citywide day of civil disobedience with the group of young activists who marched on St. Louis City Hall and occupied the building, asking to speak with Mayor Slay. I've heard members of the Ethical Society say that they have been watching the protests in Ferguson, and aren't sure what it is the protesters want. This is amazing to me. If you don't know what the protesters in Ferguson want, then you simply haven't been paying attention to the people protesting.

On October 20 our demands were clear, and not dissimilar to the demands that protesters have been raising since the Ferguson movement began: **1. An effective civilian review board; 2. Body cameras on any police directly interacting with civilians; 3. Independent investigation of all police-involved shootings; and, 4. Removal of the St. Louis Police Department from the 1033 program and any other program that allows police to acquire military-grade weapons and armor.**

To me, all of these demands seem like obvious things the city should already be doing:

- the police should be actively involved in open communication with the communities they serve;
- we should be able to keep a record of police activity and hold officers and the people they interact with accountable for their crimes;
- criminal investigations should not be performed by the lead suspects of the investigations;
- state and local police don't need to be using military weapons (which they are not even required to be trained to use) against civilian populations.

In our action at City Hall, I was confronted with my privilege as a white person. I and two other people hid large, folded banners reading "BE ACCOUNTABLE OR BE GONE", "WHICH SIDE ARE YOU

ON” and “WE ARE THE PEOPLE WE HAVE THE POWER” under our clothing and smuggled them through the security checkpoint set up at the main entrance. We had intended to hang these banners from the second floor balcony while a larger group of protesters (which ended up being 80-100 people in all) marched up to meet us in the rotunda.

By the time we arrived, however, the police had blocked off the second floor, and so we joined the larger group of protesters and opened the banners on the first floor, holding them up ourselves until we were able to hang them from the staircase railings. The first protester to attempt to tie one banner off was arrested, but dozens moved in to take his place, and by the time they had carried him away, we had two banners hung on either side of the room.

I and a young man of color, who I had never met before, were left holding the third, and he pointed up the stairs, motioning me to follow him up with the banner. In that moment, I was distinctly aware of my privilege: if I were to take the lead, and march up those stairs with him following me, I would put us both at risk of arrest. But the risk would not be equal. I, a young white person of male appearance, had privileges that this black man would never know. If we were both arrested, he would be far more likely to face abuse, and he would be scrutinized to a much greater extent than I would be simply because of the color of our skin.

Beyond that, I realized that the risk I was taking there in that place, the risk of arrest that I was willing to accept that day, is a risk that he is faced with every day of his life. Black men in this country must be constantly vigilant, walking on eggshells to avoid anything that could possibly be construed as threatening or criminal. As a white person, I am able to express myself in whatever way I desire, and am given a great deal of lenience by law enforcement and society in general. As a black man, he is under constant threat of abuse, arrest, and even violent death if he ever does anything that the police could possibly interpret as threatening or criminal.

When asked to write about my experience with the Ferguson protests, I was hesitant at first, because I don't think a white person who moved to St. Louis a month after the protests began is the ideal person to do so. However, I do think that someone within the Ethical Society of St. Louis should be bringing more attention to this, and we seem to have a troublesome shortage of black activist voices among us. I hope you are asking yourself why that is, and what it says about the Society.

I moved to St. Louis this September, so the city and the Ethical Society are fairly new to me. It has been very strange over the last several weeks to hear people questioning whether the Society should become active with the Ferguson protests while simultaneously wondering why the Society lacks racial diversity and how we can become more appealing to people of color. To me, it seems apparent that one of these questions answers the other. The Society is unappealing to people of color simply because it does not take an active role in advocating for many of the issues that matter to them.

I'm told this wasn't always the case, and historically, Ethical Societies (including this one) have played important roles in activism for racial equality. I haven't been around long enough to see this take place. I wasn't here before the Society moved from a relatively diverse area in downtown St. Louis to the nearly entirely white-populated City of Clayton. We have a beautiful building there, and one to be proud of, but being proud of its location is difficult. While the Society does have a history of standing against racial oppression, I certainly hope we didn't leave that behind in the move to a more affluent, white neighborhood.

Of course, I don't expect the Society to adopt positions incongruent with its principals just to attract a larger, more diverse membership, so maybe it's a question worth asking after all. “Should the Society take an active role in opposing institutional racism?”

What I'm not going to do here is waste my time trying to convince anyone that institutional racism exists. The statistical evidence is so overwhelming that denying its existence at this point would be as anti-science as denying evolution or climate change. I have no time to waste arguing with people who so blatantly disregard science and evidence in favor of their own personal biases.

So, starting with the assumption that we aren't entirely discrediting the clear evidence that institutional racism is a real issue, in setting out to write this, one of the first things I thought was "How can I make white readers understand the importance of this issue? How can I demonstrate the ways that institutional racism affects everyone, even privileged white people?", but then I realized that I shouldn't have to. We call ourselves an "Ethical Society", and I care because I am ethical. The effects of institutional racism don't have to personally affect me (though I believe that to some extent they do) for me to care and feel a duty to act.

If we accept that institutional racism is a problem and believe that we are devoted to living ethical lives and standing up for the oppressed, then what else stands between us and getting involved in a movement to fight racial oppression and work to defend the lives and safety of people of color?

I suppose there are still people who get all their news from corporate, white owned and operated, mainstream, establishment media. I would have hoped that by now we all would have realized how biased and unreliable traditional media has become. Since the Ferguson movement began, major news sources have made every attempt to ignore the protests, and when they could no longer be ignored, to demonize protesters or boil their message down to those handy little sound-bites the press likes so much. If that is a person's only source of news about what's happening in the world, then no doubt they will be severely misinformed about these protests as well as a vast number of other things.

I've also heard people in the Society claim they agree with the protesters, but that they are uncomfortable or inconvenienced by the protests or hesitant to join them for fear that the protests might get rowdy or the police might become violent. These people should be damn thankful they were born white.

White privilege provides us the ability to decide whether to get involved, and the luxury of choosing to avoid confrontations with the police. Had we been born with a different color of skin, confrontations with the police would be inevitable, and these issues would directly impact our lives no matter how we attempted to distance ourselves from these protests. This is the height of our privilege, and many in the Society appear to be embracing this privilege wholeheartedly, grasping desperately for any excuse to avoid taking an active role in fighting for the oppressed people all around them.

Through my participation in many protests in Ferguson and St. Louis, I realized that I have a duty to follow the oppressed into the fray and stand beside them in solidarity. How else will we build a more just and peaceful society?

Global Poverty and Trade Policy - Harry Thorn **Member, Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia**

Editor's note: Harry Thorn is a long-time member of the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia and occasionally writes on political and economic issues. He received a BA in Economics from Yale University in 1967. Please share your thoughts about whether the trade policy suggested here might effectively reduce global exploitation and poverty and we will include them in a future EAR. Send your thoughts directly to me at HughTM@gmail.com.

Throughout history, the norm for international economics has been exploitation by powerful nations. Laissez-faire economics is a rationale that allows exploitation by the powerful. Today's exploitation is by the multinational corporations and banks, which promote our current trade agreements. These agreements were written by and for them.

The supporters of our current trade agreements make two false claims that have devastating impact:

1. No governing policies are needed beyond a laissez-faire economy.
2. Trade economics can be separated from development economics.

The global economic policy we need is to promote regional development, not ignore it. Trade economists claim that a trade imbalance is not a problem because the imbalance will be ended by fluctuations in the currency market. It's not that easy.

Paul Krugman has pointed out that devastating errors come into economics when we assume that simple equations on a piece of paper describe the real world. Fluctuations in the currency market do not solve all problems. With large fluctuations an economy could be devastated, and the government could be destabilized, before balance is achieved.

Our present system results in a lack of opportunity. Some nations accumulate chronic national and trade debt. Unemployment remains high. Loss of production hollows out their economy and their middle class. That is too great a price to pay for free trade. Lack of economic opportunity in the current system has been one of the main causes of Putin's aggression against the status quo.

What is needed to end global poverty and remove imbalance is simple. The trade agreements should include a limited tariff. A nation that continues to accumulate trade debt at a certain rate should be able to implement a protective tariff. Currency fluctuations and the limited tariff do similar things and work well together.

Trade wars have been a problem in the past. Conservatives and libertarians warn about it. But this policy does not allow a trade war. There are many examples in history where a protective tariff was valuable in promoting development. It worked to start industry in the early US. England was the dominant producer.

Every nation has its history, culture, and existing economy. Development economic policy should begin with these, not ignore them, which is what our current trade agreements do. Physical scientists and engineers know that systems cannot be connected without impedance matching. Without impedance matching between different systems, the exchange of information or energy could disrupt or blow-up one or both systems. The combination of the currency market and the limited tariff is the impedance matching needed between societies engaged in trade.¹

One thing the limited tariff does is keep money in a nation which needs development, instead of shipping the money out. In a domestic economy, the tariff acts like a sales tax. If people are failing to produce competitively, their immediate feedback is to pay this "sales tax." The tariff could motivate foreign producers to build plants locally, which may be the start of local industry and employment.

Everyone talks about globalization, but instead of supporting shared standards, our current trade agreements promote a race to the bottom. They do not protect the health of the workplace and the environment.

Presidents Clinton and Obama and others have suggested that the trade agreements could include more standards to protect workers and the environment. It's a good idea. The problem is that it's difficult to

micromanage what other nations do. We have seen that governments are capable of self-serving lies and manipulation. The limited tariff avoids all that.²

NOTES:

¹ “Impedance,” a term used in software, is defined in Wiktionary (11/2014) as “a measure of the opposition caused by differences between two paradigms.” Whether in politics or economics, laissez-faire theorists don’t recognize paradigms. In psychology it was a blank slate. In economics it was a rational man who has no bias or agenda. All these theories have been discredited. The “paradigm” or system of a nation is its region and its history and culture. Development economics should build on these rather than sweep them aside. What we have and what we need is a mixed system. There are important roles both for a free market and entrepreneurship and for government, the sovereign power of the citizens.

² Not that these authors endorse the ideas in this essay, but important critiques of the trade agreements and of neoliberal economics can be found in:

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/03/15/on-the-wrong-side-of-globalization/>
<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/27/inequality-is-not-inevitable/>?
<http://www.hightowerlowdown.org/node/3402>

The first two are by Joseph Stiglitz, professor of economics at Columbia and a Nobel laureate. The third is by newsletter publisher Jim Hightower who served two terms in statewide office in Texas as Commissioner of Agriculture.

Ethical Action Spotlight

With many thanks to Ember Assington and Harry Thorn for contributing text and ideas to this month’s EAR, and to Amanda Poppei for her editorial assistance. Let’s continue the dialogue in our national movement – submit comments, articles and suggestions for future EAR editions!

Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader, Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia and Baltimore Ethical Society.

The Ethical Action Report 2.0

As Ethical Societies around the country begin their 2014-2015 program season, the EAR is evolving to try to be more useful to you and to generate more constructive, engaged dialogue about “deed before creed” throughout the movement. We hope this new format offers stimulating ideas and practical hints that make ethical action more effective and rewarding at your societies and in your lives.

EAR 2.0 hopes to offer:

- More in-depth analysis of particular social justice issues.
- Stories of ethical action projects that worked well at one of our societies and might enliven your home society.
- Discussion of ways to frame Ethical Culture’s commitment to Ethical Action
- Excerpts from recent Ethical Culture platform addresses or statements from around the movement about civic, social, or ethical issues.

Join the fun!
Offer your thoughts and news items -

***For the January edition coming to you in “Dialogue” and titled ‘Ethical Action Features,’
And also for the February edition of the Ethical Action Report.***

- Write about an issue with which you are familiar due to your professional life or private interest.
- Share news about an interesting ethical action project at your society, current or from the past.
- Write a “letter to the EAR editor” addressing any articles in this or future issues, or about other issues relating to our commitment to action.
- Do a historical reflection on an Ethical Action moment from Ethical Culture’s history.

Submit your essay early and the editorial volunteers can help polish your offering. Feel free to float your idea by me at HughTM@gmail.com or send something to me by the 15th of the month. All final copy has to be sent to me no later than the 25th of December for the Dialogue’s ‘Ethical Action Features’ and the 25th of January for the Ethical Action Report.

Sincerely,
Hugh Taft-Morales - Ethical Culture Leader and Editor, *Ethical Action Report*

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To share your views on national legislation with the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) visit: www.secular.org

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