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I rarely use this show to read someone else's work. But occasionally I come across something so good that I just have to share it. So this show will be minus the usual "snark" - but I promise you won't be disappointed. So let's begin:

The U.S. Civil War Continues

As the government shutdown makes plain,

U.S. society is still at war with itself

By Stephan Richter

One of the biggest hoaxes of American history is that the Civil War ended back in 1865. Unfortunately, it has not ended yet. What was achieved back then was an armistice, similar to the situation between the two Koreas.

As the current logjam in the U.S. Congress makes plain, the Civil War is still very present in today’s America — and with virulence that most other civilized nations find as breathtaking as it is irresponsible.

There are plenty of U.S. commentators now who try to make light of the current situation in their country. They argue that it is just a bunch of crazy Tea Party Republicans that are causing the current mayhem. Such an interpretation underestimates the forces of history and the continuing deep divisions of American society.

The reason why the Civil War was declared finished, according to the history books, is the military defeat of the South and its secessionist forces. But can anyone seriously doubt that the same anti-Union spirit is still to be heard loud and clear in the halls of the U.S. Congress today?

Not just health care, rather a cultural battle

The fight against Obamacare is cast by Republicans as fighting the authoritarian — and, in the words of some conservative commentators, “fascist” — views of the Obama Administration and what they label as the American left. Meanwhile, in their own eyes, the Republicans are fighting the good fight of staking out the democratic (!) and libertarian political high ground, all in the defense of “freedom.”

This underscores that what is really going on in Washington today is a replay of the Kulturkampf, a period of German history that occurred in the 1870's. At the time, that country’s modernizing forces resolved to fight back against the economically retarding influence of conservative religious forces, mainly the Catholic Church.

Germany’s mid-19th century Catholic Church, a very powerful economic force at the time, fiercely resisted any suggestions of modernizing the social structures of society — just as many Republicans do now. It sought to preserve the economic power of the well established, largely feudal-era interests, i.e., its own — much as Republicans do now.

The fight in Washington thus is not about any of the things in the headlines, be it the budget, debt, or “Obamacare.” These are merely proxies in a much more fundamental battle over the future structure of American society.

Democrats want those structures to be opened up, to create more economic rights for the underprivileged, so that the national economy can grow in the future. To Republicans, any investment in these and other long-term causes is a net negative on what they see as their core mission — defending the interests of rich Americans.

Really about who has economic power

Thus, we are largely dealing with a battle over redistributing shares of economic power, covered up in the clothing of cultural values. That is why it is so bitterly fought. To either side, the entire future of the country is at stake.

The proper way to understand the slavery issue as well as the health care law, therefore, is to see them as symbols of much deeper conflicts.

As it turns out, even the parallel developments in the legislative process are amazing. Slavery was formally abolished in the United States in 1865 and, for a few years, in the period of Reconstruction, there seemed to be a will to move the country ahead.

But even back then, the intended key reform component was never really followed through. That step was setting up a bank that would also get involved in granting freed slaves loans, so that they could build a prosperous future for themselves and their families.

The so-called Freedman’s Bureau met a fate similar to what today’s Republicans have in mind for the health care law, which they call “Obamacare.”

The Freedman’s Bureau lingered on for a few years, before it essentially faded away. The economic, social and cultural consequences of condemning freed slaves essentially to a life of continued servitude, albeit of another kind, are well known. They are the root cause of the culture of dependence that sadly continues to this day — and that today’s Republicans are quick to use as a justification not to do more for African Americans.

The Affordable Health Care Act passed the U.S. Congress, just as the Freedman’s Bureau had been established in 1865. With their countless defunding moves, the Republicans are pursuing a similar strategy, as was the case with the Freedman’s Bureau before. In today’s case, they are trying to prevent that nationwide access to health care can truly become reality in the land. Amazing how history repeats itself.

Fundamental shifts in the two parties

Of course, there is one very important distinction — and one that should truly make today’s Republicans squirm. In the case of the U.S. Civil War of 1861-65, it was the Republicans, who were mostly found in the North at the time, who were the political force aligned against slavery (President Lincoln was a Republican), while it was Southern Democrats who fiercely resisted its abolition, as well as resisting the Civil Rights Act one hundred years later.

In essence, now the South is once again rebelling against modernizing shifts of American society. Today, in one of the great political realignments of modern politics, that region is the power base of Republicans.

The equivalent of politically and economically freeing the slaves back then is now granting health care access to all Americans. In either case, the old order is about to be toppled and that leads especially Southerners and white conservatives everywhere, to fear for the end of the United States, as they know it.

Back then, they felt the abolition of slavery and the economic independence of blacks had to be prevented at all costs because the Southern state economies and their leaders’ personal wealth depended on slavery and the economic suppression of the ultimate underclass.

Now, the move by Obama to declare that the state plays a role in securing that all Americans are under the umbrella of health insurance plays the role of the secessionist cause.

The old confederacy and Medicaid

Look at the list of state governors who refused to expand the medical program for low-income people (Medicaid) and compare that to the list of states that fought to preserve slavery. There is an amazing overlap.

Ten of the Eleven Former Confederate States Are Not Participating in the Expansion of Medicaid:

Participating

Arkansas

Not Participating

Alabama

Florida

Georgia

Louisiana

Mississippi

North Carolina

South Carolina

Texas

Virginia

and Tennessee (which may reverse its rejection).

There is one more big irony to be pointed out in a historic context: It would be a great injustice to conservatives anywhere on the planet to agree with U.S. Republicans that opposing health insurance coverage for the entire population is conservative in any sense of the word.

One of the world’s greatest archconservatives, the then German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, introduced health coverage for all Germans as far back as 1883. What is it about U.S. “conservatives” that, by 2013 — 130 years after Bismarck — they cannot muster the same degree of enlightenment as Bismarck?

The present state of affairs runs amazingly counter to America’s global ideology. According to its self-promotion, the United States casts itself as the modernizing vanguard of humanity. In light of what’s going on in Washington today, it is evident that close to half of the U.S. Congress wants an America that is more conservative than Bismarck’s 1880's Germany.

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THE SCIENCE SEGMENT

Mechanisms Identified That Allow Embryonic Stem Cells

to Become Any Cell in the Human Body

New research at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem sheds light on pluripotency -- the ability of embryonic stem cells to renew themselves indefinitely and to differentiate into all types of mature cells. Solving this problem, which is a major challenge in modern biology, could expedite the use of embryonic stem cells in cell therapy and regenerative medicine.

If scientists can replicate the mechanisms that make pluripotency possible, they could create cells in the laboratory which could be implanted in humans to cure diseases characterized by cell death, such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, diabetes and other degenerative diseases.

To shed light on these processes, researchers are combining molecular, microscopic and genomic approaches. One team is focusing on epigenetic pathways -- which cause biological changes without a corresponding change in the DNA sequence -- that are specific to embryonic stem cells.

The molecular basis for epigenetic mechanisms is chromatin, which is comprised of a cell's DNA and structural and regulatory proteins. In groundbreaking research, the mechanisms which support an "open" chromatin conformation in embryonic stem cells were examined. The researchers found that chromatin is less condensed in embryonic stem cells, allowing them the flexibility or "functional plasticity" to turn into any kind of cell.

A distinct pattern of chemical modifications of chromatin structural proteins (referred to as the acetylation and methylation of histones) enables a looser chromatin configuration in embryonic stem cells. During the early stages of differentiation, this pattern changes to facilitate chromatin compaction.

But even more interestingly, researchers found that a nuclear lamina protein, lamin A, is also a part of the secret. In all differentiated cell types, lamin A binds compacted domains of chromatin and anchors them to the cell's nuclear envelope. Lamin A is absent from embryonic stem cells and this may enable the freer, more dynamic chromatin state in the cell nucleus.

Researchers believe that chromatin plasticity is tantamount to functional plasticity since chromatin is made up of DNA that includes all genes and codes for all proteins in any living cell.

Understanding the mechanisms that regulate chromatin function will enable intelligent manipulations of embryonic stem cells in the future.

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FAMOUS QUOTES

STEVEN NOVELLA (no biography - previously quoted)

"Questioning our own motives, and our own process,

is critical to a skeptical and scientific outlook.

We must realize that the default mode of human psychology

is to grab onto comforting beliefs for purely emotional reasons,

and then justify those beliefs to ourselves

with post-hoc rationalizations.

It takes effort to rise above this tendency,

to step back from our beliefs

and our emotional connection to conclusions

and focus on the process.

The process (i.e science, logic, and intellectual rigor)

has to be more important than the belief."