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To the editors,

Survey after Survey

According to Mark Lilla, “survey after survey confirms that trust in government is dissolving”. [*The New York Review*, May 27, 2010] Wrong! All we know from surveys—from asking questions—is what people *say*. Today, respondents *say* they have less trust in government than they *said* they had 50 years ago. But it’s what people *do*, not what they *say*, that indicates their values, beliefs, and attitudes, such as trust in government. “Talk is cheap”, labor organizer Cesar Chavez pointed out some time ago, “the way we . . . use our lives every day . . . tells what we believe in”¹. Slavoj Zizek also understands the relationship between words, deeds, and attitudes: “[T]he truth [about ourselves] lies . . . in what we *do*”². Even Lilla’s “Tea Party Jacobins”—certainly those who are Jesus Christers—recognize the primacy of behavior over words, or at least they should, since it’s divinely scripted: “Verily, verily, you will know them by what they *do*”³. So, whenever anyone—tea bagger, labor organizer, intellectual, professor, or whoever—wants to know about trust in government, or any other subjective phenomenon, don’t ask, don’t survey. Instead, observe what people are *doing* and then assign to them subjective attributes consistent with their behaviors.

What are Americans *doing*? And what do their behaviors indicate about their trust in government; about their reliance on the ability of government to meet their needs? It seems to

¹ <http://www.ufw.org/page.php?menue=research&inc=history/09.html>

² Slavoj Zizek, *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce* (New York: Verso, 2009), p. 40. Emphasis added.

³ Matthew 7:16. Emphasis added.

me, the behaviors of most Americans demonstrate that today, as in the past, they trust government. They organize, spend money, vote, and in many other ways pressure and support governments at national, state, and local levels to keep the Current Enemy (CE)—previously, Atheistic Communists, now Muslim Jihadists—at bay and to kill, if possible—but only in Christian love—every goddamn one of them. Behaviors of most Americans indicate they trust government to protect them from the CE. Also, consider Bobby Jindal, governor of Louisiana, who *said* in 2009 that government “interference”—as he called it then—is hardly, if ever needed but, now that BP oil pollutes the Gulf and destroys businesses, he, as well as most Americans, demand and support government action—or “interference”, as Bobby no longer calls it—to stop the oil, clean up the waters and shores, force BT to pay for damages, *and make sure it doesn't happen again!* These behaviors are evidence of trust in government, as are demands and support for more government regulations of credit default swaps, mortgages, and other bank and financial instruments to better the economic situation now in significant decline. *And you, GOVERNMENT! Make sure the banks and financial institutions don't mess us up again!*

Actually, the behaviors of most Americans most of the time indicate their trust in government. By the millions, Americans pick up their mail and check electronic deposits, expecting and receiving social security checks or deposits made out, or sent, to the correct person, with the right amount, *and on time!* Americans would not behave in these ways unless they trusted government to cut these checks and make these deposits. Americans trust government to manage traffic, maintain bridges, and insure the safety of food and medicine. Trust in government is also demonstrated by countless citizens who hourly and daily contact police, elected officials, agency administrators, and other state and local personnel and offices concerning missing children, vandalism, neighborhood fires, garbage pickup, driver licenses,

utilities, permits for one thing or another, and myriad other problems and issues, expecting, as well as receiving in many, but not all, instances, adequate resolution and redress. Most Americans trust government.

The relatively few Americans who do not trust government include residents of Englewood; a Chicago food-desert neighborhood with low income, high unemployment, extensive alcoholism, rampant illicit drug use and pushing, gang warfare, and other attributes of America-The-Beautiful's ugly urban enclaves of (mostly) African-Americans god blessed with freedom and equality. Their lack of trust is (to use Lilla's word) confirmed, not by "survey after survey", but by their actions; specifically, by their refusal to cooperate with police to identify shooters, gang members, and others who fill their lives with violence and contribute to their destitution. Residents of Englewood do not trust the police, the courts, government because they're convinced, and rightly so, that the police, the courts, government cannot protect them if they were to identify the perpetrators. The attitude of people in Englewood toward government—i.e., their lack of trust in government—is known by what they *do*.

One (but not the only) reason more Americans these days *say* they do not trust government is because they, to a much greater extent than Americans 50 years ago, have been socialized/indoctrinated/propagandized/educated by university professors (such as Lilla), government officials, pollsters, radio talkers, TV commentators, bloggers, and so on who, relying on "survey after survey", continually insist that trust in government is declining. After Americans are told, time and again, and without a hint of doubt, that fewer and fewer of them

trust government (and that America is a democracy and it's people free) and, then, asked about trust in government (or democracy and freedom) most will give answers consistent with the socialization/indoctrination/propaganda/education they've experienced: I do not trust government (America is a democracy, I am free).

Lilla's reliance on "survey after survey" and the mistaken, but common, belief that survey results are more than what respondents say, explain why he's "puzzled" by the "greater affluence and relative peace" that Americans now have and the "far less trust in . . . government" he, and social scientists since the mid-Sixties, attribute to them. Puzzled? Figure it out! Here's how. DO NOT DROP "SAY"! Remember, from "survey after survey" all you have is what Americans *say*. Thus, the statement, "despite greater affluence and relative peace, Americans have far less trust in government", should read: "despite greater affluence and relative peace, Americans [*say they*] have far less trust in government". Why do they *say* they have less trust in government than they *said* when they were worse off? A major reason, as I've shown above, is that since the mid-Sixties, Americans have been socialized/indoctrinated/propagandized/educated by "survey after survey" persuading them that "trust in government is dissolving"; thus, when asked about their trust in government, more of them today than in the past, *say* they do not trust government⁴. End of puzzle.

But that's not the end of what's wrong with Lilla's effort to explain the tea baggers and American politics. His reliance on "survey after survey" and his belief that surveys are more

⁴ It's not uncommon for respondents to continue to *say* they distrust and dislike government—to continue to complain about government—even after government has improved the conditions they complained about. See, for example, Brian Stipak, "Citizen Satisfaction With Urban Services: Potential Misuse as a Performance Indicator", *Public Administration Review* (January/February 1979), Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 46-52, and the works cited therein.

than what respondents *say* also lead him to make absurd statements about our country and its politics; to wit: “We know that the country is divided today, because people *say* it is divided⁵. In politics, thinking makes it so”. In the first sentence, Lilla would have us believe the country is divided because people *say* it is divided. Really? Saying makes it so? Wrong! Saying does not make it so, as even preschoolers know. Just because respondents in “survey after survey” *say* that the country is divided does not mean that it *is* divided. In the second sentence, Lilla tries to segue out of his absurdity by changing the topic from “the country” to “politics” and by transforming what respondents *say* into what they *think*. Here, he would have us believe: (1) what people *say* is what they think—Wrong!—and (2) in politics, thinking makes it so. Wrong again! From “survey after survey” you can only conclude what people *say*; you can’t conclude what they’re thinking, let alone that they’re thinking what they’re *saying*. For example, Democrats who *say* Bush Born Twice (BBT) lied when he claimed Iraq had WMDs, might think he did not lie—might think he merely went with the (incorrect?) information he had—but they *say* he lied to foster opposition to BBT and other Republicans, and to generate support for Democrats. Life is full of deception, downright lies, political and corporate spinning, and the like. Moreover, Lilla’s assertion, “In politics, thinking makes it so”, is wrong because the only way to know what’s so in politics, what’s really going on in politics, is to acquire empirical, objective, data about politics; in this case, empirical, objective, data concerning a supposed divide in the country. To find out if the country is divided and, if so, to what extent, you need to establish an operational definition of the divide and, then, measure activities of people—e.g., votes in legislatures, size, resources, and programs (TV ads, etc.) of political parties and grassroots organizations, etc.—on each side of the divide. *Doing*—not thinking—makes it so in

⁵ Emphasis added.

politics. As the great, and largely ignored, political scientist Arthur Bentley (1879-1957) advised: “observ[e]. . . . “something *doing*””⁶; “observ[e]. . . . actually performed . . . activities”⁷.

“Survey after survey” produces misunderstandings, whether the topic is trust in government, politics, or anything else. To minimize errors and optimize knowledge, I’ll conclude with three suggestions: 1. Don’t ask if you want to find out what’s really going on. 2. Don’t accept books, articles, or newspaper, TV, or internet accounts based on asking. 3. Acquire information by scientific methods of data collection and scientific research designs; such as observation, experimentation, and the like⁸.

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⁶ Arthur F. Bentley, *The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995) pp. 187, 176. Emphasis added. *The Process of Government* was first published in 1908.

⁷ Bentley, *The Process of Government*, pp. 187, 180.

⁸ My critique of survey research and advocacy of scientific procedures are more fully developed in my paper, “The Problem with Survey Research and What to Do about It”, available at: http://george-beam.com/docs/gbeam_survey_research_aabss2010.pdf Also relevant is the Preface of my manuscript, *Don’t Ask—If You Want to Find Out What’s Really Going On*, available at: <http://george-beam.com/dontask.html>