

Democracy, equality, commonality

The happiest day in Buffalo is the day before the football team's home opener, for on that day, we stop moaning about our lost children. They're not lost, actually. Some of them have just moved, temporarily, to where it's warmer and drier. Gradually, some of the clever ones filter back to practice medicine or to inherit the family business, and to enjoy the water, the woods, the closeness of the unique interior life here, and Canada. These re-migrants avoid the general political discourse of Upstate New York, which has for decades consisted of a litany of blame. Loud people blame taxes for the region's failure to become a fast-expanding Sunbelt suburb. They caterwaul about the wages of cops, firemen, social workers, and highway-repair crews. Quiet people do not go unaffected by this rant, for even they believe that the region has utterly lost its population of clever young people, never to regain it. Even they have come to believe that despair is a rational response, and that deliverance will arrive if only democracy departs. This is sad.

This used to be such a dirty, fun, mobbed-up, and raucous town, like Carl Sandburg's Chicago—broad-shouldered, boozy. The Erie Canal ended (or started) here, and the lake boats brought all of the trade of America's interior to this port. You know what that means: sailors. And where there are sailors, there are saloons, girls for rent, dullard shopkeepers, loan sharks and cardsharps, immigrants, boat owners, speculators, puff-chested bankers, unions, and the free flow of money that nobody can quite keep track of. A port next to a border is even more trouble, because borders are all about smuggling, and that's where the real fun is to be had.

Buffalo's nostalgia would be more entertaining, certainly, if it were a true and genuine longing for its lost array of opportunities for vice and vengery. We should encourage nostalgia for old Chippewa Street, for

example: for one hundred years, Chippewa Street was a row of saloons in which sailors drank up their pay, and paid to watch women who danced without the interference of excessive clothing. Whatever funds remained available to these gypsy workers tended to get invested in the local economy—not in housing or in grain futures or in iron ore contracts, but in the short-term companionship arrangements that sent sailors back to their grain boats and ore boats, back to the Soo and to Duluth and to Milwaukee broke, and itchy.

Instead, Buffalo is nostalgic for steel plants and for the class warfare of the industrial age that so shaped the landscape and created enduring identities. Back when there was heavy metal industry, so the gripe goes, we had top-hatted tycoons who flaunted their wealth, and tough unions who wrestled it away from the bastards. Back then, folks knew their place—where to live, where to walk, eat, worship, flirt, dance, die. Back then, everybody worked, and everybody came home from college or from the service to do what everyone had always done.

But then came the great out-migration of capital from the whole Great Lakes region, and specific departures: after the Second World War, the mobsters and the violent unions scared the aerospace pioneers (Buffalo engineers invented the jet engine) into the warm arms of California. Others left, too, but cars stayed, chemicals stayed, colleges and banks stayed, and a huge university actually grew tenfold, but the big, visible blast furnaces and coke ovens and ingot works and rolling mills emptied, and no matter that it stayed a sweet place with nice water, good Canadian beer, old trees, pretty buildings, ducks to hunt, music to hear and books to borrow, the town set to whining, and hasn't stopped.

But then every town has its signature gripe. In Montreal, it's Toronto, still and always Toronto. In Toronto, it's America in general, and especially America's utter indifference to Canada, but in self-aware and thriving and now-sophisticated Toronto, which is barely one hundred miles from Buffalo and no longer the boring place where one's elderly Loyalist aunts dwelt amid lace antimacassars and sturdy oak pews, they still say to themselves "at least we're better than Buffalo." The gripe in Chicago is New York, except when it's Chicago's own embarrassment over its own ineradicable political corruption, but in Chicago, in that belligerent Chicago way, the embarrassment of living in a political cartoon gives way to a cocky, up-tempo arch of the brow as the chat turns to predicting which of the mayor's guys is going to squeal first.

Buffalo used to have scoundrels, for Buffalo used to be such a dirty, corrupt town, with the canal the source and conduit of its wealth

and its dirt. The Erie Canal started or ended right at the foot of Main Street. New York State's schools teach all the kids about that day in October 1825 when Governor DeWitt Clinton scooped up a jug of Lake Erie water from Buffalo Harbor, and took it down to New York Harbor where, nine days later, he performed the "wedding of the waters," thus joining the Great Lakes and the Atlantic. The town that now whines about government and taxes was created—indeed, New York City itself was created—by a massive expenditure of public funds called the Erie Canal. It was—whiners please note—precisely that investment of taxes that created the commerce from which the wealth flowed. Immigrants by the tens of thousands came through dirty Buffalo and its dirty waterfront, and from its docks they lit out for the West. The squalor, exploitation, prostitution, and venery of the docks started in 1825 and continued for a hundred and thirty years, until the Welland Canal opened and made of Buffalo an obsolete port. Then great and enduring panic set in. Well-intended urban-renewal projects tossed out all the poor people from the docks, and the docks themselves were dismantled. The state government filled in the last stretch of the Erie Canal and built an expressway in its right-of-way. Patronage politics lingered on and on just like in Chicago, even longer, but not so colorfully. The Erie Canal waterfront was for a hundred years a regional symbol of sin, even though it was in that very harbor, at the terminus of the Erie Canal, that the great sin of slavery was combated most effectively, for it was Buffalo Harbor that was the last stop on the Underground Railroad. Canada, which is to say freedom, is the shore just a couple of miles across from Buffalo Harbor.

So this is a place of liberation, and of possibility. Its air should ring with a joyful chatter of peace (Canadians don't have many guns) and of prosperity (Canadians make excellent beer) and of happy times, because the water is quite clean now.

And kids? Departing kids? There is this to say about kids. Kids are notoriously interested in traveling, especially to the sunny South, especially kids whose parents relentlessly inculcated in them the equation Sunshine = Good. A decade ago, I designed a political campaign for a Buffalo friend, a successful campaign, which succeeded brilliantly in getting him elected on the Keep Our Kids platform. The kids, of course, kept moving around, as kids do. So everybody got mad, and now there isn't any sport in public life in Buffalo anymore, because everybody in Buffalo is convinced that the kids are gone for good. The local ruling class picked up on this sense of defeated expectations, and now, rather than enjoying a happy chatter in which we all admit that this is the best

place in the world, with good fishing, too, the loud people forever repeat the rant about taxes, and bus drivers' salaries, and lost kids. So instead of being happy about all that there is to be happy about, folks do go *on* with their bad-tempered whining about taxes—and for this I blame myself. Thankfully, there is the start of the football season.

That is when Buffalo ceases its caterwaul about its stain. The community ignores the four opportunities that the football team has had to win the Super Bowl. Hope, in September, each September, springs eternal.

So it was this past September. At noon, in a light rain, we put our slickers on, and began planting crocus and tulip bulbs in the rain-softened soil. I selfishly hoped that the rain would stop in time for me to put my single in the Black Rock Canal (the part of the Erie Canal that still works) for a good long row, a good cool fall row, before the unwelcome guest drops in from Canada and makes an ice rink of my best water. Shovel in hand, yellow slicker-clad, we listened to the pregame show on Canadian radio because it's an AM station in St. Catharines that carries the game for them and for us, too.

The other Canadian guests are most welcome, any time. The Canadians cross this way with their new strong dollars. They become indistinguishable from Buffalo people, for Canadians forsake their national insignia for toques, jackets, jerseys, headbands, and peaked caps with the blue and white bison logo of the football team. And the Buffalo people shed their own class and race and political affinities and merge into a new, happy, hopeful iteration.

Perhaps this happens only here. Perhaps it is different in Pittsburgh and Cleveland, in Detroit and St. Louis, in festering Baltimore with its amusement park waterfront and its sprawl and its Pigtown. But it can't be. We can't be alone in being a queer stranded community within which all the characteristic boundaries of class, race, national identity, and ethnic style are broken. I will ask: do all those football cities, do they too all have lefties like we do in Buffalo? Here is what ours are like: ours spend the week lamenting national politics and reiterating their credentials as devoted enemies of the skybox class, and then suddenly, on pregame Saturday, they're ready to parse the defensive secondary, and to praise the new coach's decision to go for it on fourth and three last week in New England, and to walk through the injury list, and to debate our prospects if the new quarterback can't find the short-yardage tempo he'd found in the preseason. Even the day before the home opener, the talk on the lefty radio station, as among the 8 a.m. regulars at Spot Coffee, became,

because of football, the same species of manly assertions asserted in the locker room at the Country Club of Buffalo.

It's football. It's the Bills. Everybody here cares about the Bills. If football is meaningless to you, or if you hold it in contempt, I caution you to listen up anyway: in Buffalo, nobody in business, on the faculty, in the courts, at the library, or in the grocery store will bother speaking to you on a football weekend unless you have something to say about the Bills. Thus in vain will one seek contradiction of the following assertion about Buffalo: that the chatter on the mountaintop is identical to the chatter in the valley.

That would be a claim that's been made before.

It has a certain democratic ring about it.

One version of that statement was uttered about four hundred years ago, in Florence. A terribly talented public servant took a forced vacation when the Medici prince Lorenzo roused out the incumbent Republic. The clever and experienced but nonetheless unemployed public servant went home to a place like Buffalo, to his family home, in a sort of exurb of the great city where he'd formerly had great responsibility. And there, in that exile, he did what economics compelled him to do all day long so as to keep some income coming in, so as to keep the babes fed. But at night, he described, in his letters to his friends, and in his note to his new prince, that he would doff his workaday weeds and go suitably attired into his library, there to meet his true peers for his true labor, which was to write an extended essay of advice for the new head of the new regime, with the help of all the authorities he could marshal from all his bookshelves. This he did because he, the competent discard, rather hopefully, albeit naively, believed in his own virtue, and believed that he still had much value to offer, and that the new prince ought to give him a job—maybe even his old job—just because of his record of achievement, his acknowledged and demonstrable excellence.

This person was Niccolo Machiavelli, who was brilliant, and a fool.

He wasn't ever invited back in, of course. He said he'd been high and he'd been low, and so who better than he to advise the new prince?

Indeed. The new regime not only failed to offer him a job—it arranged for him to be tortured. Hung him up by his thumbs, behind his back, and hoisted him up high because some other advisor to the new prince had decided that depriving Machiavelli of income and of occupation was insufficient punishment for his mistake, which was to have served the old regime.

Machiavelli was shocked that he was so abused. He wrote a letter to his noble friend in the new regime, one Vettori, rather in the way that a mouse asks a cat for love. “I’ve done everything you’ve asked,” he said. “I’m virtuous,” he said. Vettori was a politician. Vettori would not invest his own power to assist his friend, and so Vettori had no good news for Machiavelli.

Nevertheless, Machiavelli wrote on, and while he worked, ever hopeful, he worked like one who was being rewarded. For his labors he received, eventually, a few coins while he yet lived. He also received some accolades for the work that he did for himself—especially for his book about the Roman author Livy, and for another, smaller work, about how to fight a war. Then, after he passed, came a few centuries of vilification. His reputation for insight was then and is yet untarnished, but it didn’t get him a job in the new regime, and all his talent purchased him neither love nor good repute.

From the mountain, from the valley: that sounds like a good resume, doesn’t it? But of course the continents where the common folk dwell are all flatlands, paved over for parking so that eighty thousand of us can drive out to the stadium in all kinds of weather and shout for our team. The well off mix with the unkempt on that blacktop prairie at the pregame Sunday ritual of the tailgate. Charcoal-grilled Sahlen’s hot dogs, Weber’s mustard, hot Italian sausage from Mineo & Sapio, marjoram-and-garlic kielbasa from Wardynski’s, and two brands of Canadian beer are the sacred foods at this Seder. The classes mix, and all talk Bills talk. Then when game time approaches, the elite break away from the flow of humanity moving in through tunnels to the stadium, for the elite have their own viewing rooms there, their skyboxes.

The company pays for these set-apart spaces high above the valley. These specific mountaintops are warm. There’s a potty. There are televisions for reviewing replays. There are trays of snacks. There are great wide sliding windows that open up to let in the bright autumn air, or, in December, a jab of winter. Their seats are leather, and padded. The seats outside are hard plastic, but you knew that.

Machiavelli never was the prince. When he wrote that dedicatory preface to the essay that was his plea for reinstatement, he erred: he never, ever should have claimed to Lorenzo the Magnificent that he’d been high as well as low. Lorenzo was and always had been of the peak and not of the plain. So to the question: did the Prince Lorenzo di Medici read this unemployed Machiavelli’s letter, and heft Machiavelli’s little book in

his jeweled hand, and regard Machiavelli's broken thumbs and twisted shoulders, and think, who is this person to presume he can advise me at eye level?

Knowing the vocabulary of football is the delight of the folks outside. Too much mastery, one observes, is annoying to the people in the soft leather seats; when mastery is mere competence unmarried to money, it's not mastery, it's just . . . annoying. Princes like to feel masterful. Owners of skyboxes share this characteristic: they are not your peer. You who are in the box with them are a favored peasant, not a peer. The peasants of the native villages nearby sit outside in the weather, on the hard, cold plastic seats. They sit outside, in the weather, with their expertise about football, outside with the not-princes who pay retail for their tickets out of their own shallow pockets. Natives and peasants drink beer from paper cups. They defer. They look longingly through the windows at the skyboxers, who ignore them. "Defer, Machiavelli," you mutter as you read his letter to Lorenzo the Magnificent, knowing, sadly, the ending to that story.

Come Monday, if the Bills win, everyone will pretend that we all dwell on the plain common. When they lose, it is back to loud anger over lost children, and the reinstatement of the castes, and the Canadians go back to being Canadians.