

THE WORLD AS IT IS



DISPATCHES

ON THE MYTH OF

HUMAN PROGRESS

CHRIS HEDGES

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THE
WORLD
AS IT IS

*Dispatches on the
Myth of Human Progress*

C H R I S H E D G E S



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*For my children,
Thomas, Noëlle, Konrad, and Marina,
whose joy and laughter save me from despair and
for whom I must always hope*

Introduction

My good friend, the author and journalist Stephen Kinzer, once said to me, half in jest: “You’re not a journalist. You’re a minister pretending to be a journalist.” He was not far off the mark. I have always been more concerned with truth and justice than with news. News and truth are not the same thing. News, at least as it is configured in the faux objectivity of American journalism, can be used quite effectively to mask and obscure the truth. “Balance,” in which you give as much space, for example, to the victimizer as to the victim, may be objective and impartial, but it is usually not honest. And when you are “objective,” it means that, in your reasonableness, you ultimately embrace and defer to the status quo. There is a deep current of cynicism that runs through much of American journalism, especially on commercial electronic media. It is safe and painless to produce “balanced” news. It is very unsafe, as the best journalists will tell you, to produce truth. The great journalists, like the great preachers, care deeply about truth, which they seek to impart to their reader, listener or viewer, often at the cost of their careers.

“When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, ‘I am going to produce a work of art.’” George Orwell wrote. “I write because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.”¹

My former employer, the *New York Times*, with some of the most able and talented journalists and editors in the country, not only propagated the lies used to justify the war in Iraq, but also never saw the financial meltdown coming. These journalists and editors are besotted with their access to the powerful. They look at themselves as players, part of the inside elite. They went to the same elite colleges. They eat at the same restaurants. They go to the same parties and dinners. They live in the same exclusive neighborhoods. Their children go to the same schools. They are, if one concedes that propaganda is a vital tool for the power elite, important to the system. Journalists who should have been exposing the lies used to justify the Iraq war or reporting from low-income neighborhoods—where mortgage brokers and banks were filing fraudulent loan applications to hand money to people they knew could never pay it back—were instead “doing” lunch with the power brokers in the White House or on Wall Street. All that talent, all that money, all that expertise, all those resources proved useless when it came time to examine the two major cataclysmic events of our age. And all that news, however objective and balanced, turned out to be a lie.

I have never sought to be objective. How can you be objective about death squads in El Salvador, massacres in Iraq, or Serbian sniper fire that gunned down unarmed civilians, including children, in Sarajevo? How can you be neutral about the masters and profiteers of war who lie and dissemble to hide the crimes they commit and the profits they make? How can you be objective about human pain? And, finally, how can you be objective about those responsible for this suffering? I am not neutral about rape, torture, or murder. I am not neutral about rapists, torturers, or murderers. I am not neutral about George W. Bush or Barack Obama, who under international law are war criminals. And if you had to see the butchery of war up close, as I did for nearly two decades, you would not be neutral either.

But in the game of American journalism it is forbidden to feel. Journalists are told they must be clinical observers who interpret human reality through their eyes, not their hearts—and certainly not through their consciences. This is the deadly disease of American journalism. And it is the reason

journalism in the United States has lost its moral core and its influence. It is the reason that in a time of crisis the traditional media have so little to say. It is why the traditional media are distrusted. The gross moral and professional failings of the traditional media opened the door for the hate-mongers of Fox News and the news celebrities on commercial networks who fill our heads with trivia and celebrity gossip.

As the centers of American power were seized and hijacked by corporations, the media continued to pay deference to systems of power that could no longer be considered honest or democratic. The media treat criminals on Wall Street as responsible members of the ruling class. They treat the criminals in the White House and the Pentagon as statesmen. The media never responded to the radical reconfiguration of American politics, the slow-motion coup d'état that has turned phrases like *the consent of the governed* into a cruel joke. And because the media are not concerned with distinguishing truth from news, because they lack a moral compass, they have become nothing more than courtiers to the elite, shameless hedonists of power, and absurd court propagandists. At a moment when the country desperately needs vigorous media, it gets celebrities such as Katie Couric masquerading as journalists, who night after night “feel your pain.” The few journalists who do not, like Couric does, function as entertainers and celebrities are so timid and removed from the suffering of our dispossessed working classes that they are rightly despised. The media are hated for a reason. They deserve to be hated. They sided with the corporate forces, like most liberal institutions, as the corporate forces decimated the working class, bankrupted the economy, corrupted the legislative, executive, and judicial systems of government, and unleashed endless war and the destruction of the ecosystem on which human life depends.

I keep my distance from the powerful. I distrust all sources of power regardless of their ideological orientation. I do not want to be their friend. I do not want to advise them or be part of their inner circle. The only benefit one gets from being a White House correspondent, as far as I can tell, is that the president knows your name. I made a conscious choice to report from the developing world and war zones during most of my career. What I witnessed rarely matched the version of events spun off for the media courtiers in Washington by the power elite. As a foreign correspondent I often fought my own Washington bureau, where reporters in suits were being fed a partial version of reality and had a vested interest in reporting it as fact. The longer reporters spent in Washington, the more they looked, sounded, and acted like the power brokers they covered. At a certain point, as any Sunday morning television talk show illustrates, these courtiers in the media became indistinguishable from the power elite.

Kinzer was right. Once unleashed from the restrictions and confines of American journalism, I began to write what are, in essence, sermons. And when I read the columns collected in this book, that is how I would describe them. Sermons, when they are good, do not please a congregation. They do not make people happy. They are not a form of entertainment. They disturb many, if not most, of the listeners. They resonate with only a minority. Truth, at least as far as it can be discerned, is not comfortable or enjoyable to listen to, nor is the emotion and anger that accompanies all passionate assaults on lies and injustice. Sermons force those who hear them to be self-critical. They expose our inadequacies and failures. They demand that we become emotionally engaged. There are speakers and writers on the left and the right, including many preachers in pulpits, whose goal is to be admired and applauded. This is not my aim. It is not pleasant to be disliked—and I have faced crowds that deeply dislike me and my message—but it is necessary if your commitment is to truth and the harnessing of emotional energy and passion against those who carry out injustice. I write not with the anticipation of approval but often of hostility. And I write finally from the gut, not the head.

“The energy that actually shapes the world springs from emotions—racial pride, leader-worship, religious belief, love of war—which liberal intellectuals mechanically write off as anachronisms, and which they have usually destroyed so completely in themselves as to have lost all power of action,” Orwell noted.²

The role of a preacher is not to provide self-help manuals for the future. It is to elucidate reality and get people to act on this reality. It is impossible to speak about hope if we substitute illusion for reality. If we believe that reality is not an impediment to our desires, that we can have everything we want by tapping into our inner strength or believing in Jesus, if we believe that the fate of the human species is neverending advancement and progress, then we are crippled as agents for change. We are left responding to illusion. This makes everything we do or believe, such as our faith in the Democratic Party or electoral politics, futile and useless. The bleakness of what we face, economically and environmentally, is not a call to despair but a call to new forms of resistance and civil disobedience.

I am not religious in a traditional sense. There is no Christian denomination that would consider me a believer. I am as alienated from religious institutions as I am from secular institutions. But I was raised in the church, graduated from seminary at Harvard Divinity School, and cannot escape my intellectual and moral formation. I remain a preacher, although an unorthodox one. I believe that the truth is the only force that will set us free. I have hope, not in the tangible or in what I can personally accomplish, but in the faith that battling evil, cruelty, and injustice allows us to retain our identity, sense of meaning and ultimately our freedom. Perhaps in our lifetimes we will not succeed. Perhaps things will only get worse. But this does not invalidate our efforts. Rebellion—which is different from revolution because it is perpetual alienation from power rather than the replacement of one power system with another—should be our natural state. And faith, for me, is a belief that rebellion is always worth it, even if all outward signs point to our lives and struggles as penultimate failures. We are saved not by what we can do or accomplish but by our fealty to revolt, our steadfastness to the weak, the poor, the marginalized, and those who endure oppression. We must stand with them against the powerful. If we remain true to these moral imperatives, we win. And I am enough of an idealist to believe that the struggle to live the moral life is worth it.

During the first Persian Gulf War, when I defied the media restrictions and was in the Saudi and later Kuwait desert to cover the fighting, I was accosted one afternoon by R.W. Apple, who was overseeing the coverage for the *New York Times*.

“What is it about you and authority?” he asked.

“I have no problem with authority, Johnny, as long as authority doesn’t try and tell me what to do,” I answered.

“You dumb fuck,” he said. “That is what authority does.”

POLITICS

It's Not Going to Be OK

FEBRUARY 2, 2009

The daily bleeding of thousands of jobs will soon turn our economic crisis into a political crisis. The street protests, strikes, and riots that have rattled France, Turkey, Greece, Ukraine, Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, and Iceland will descend on us. It is only a matter of time. And not much time. When things start to go sour, when Barack Obama is exposed as a mortal waving a sword at a tidal wave, the United States could plunge into a long period of precarious social instability.

At no period in American history has our democracy been in such peril or has the possibility of totalitarianism been as real. Our way of life is over. Our profligate consumption is finished. Our children will never have the standard of living we had. And poverty and despair will sweep across the landscape like a plague. This is the bleak future. There is nothing President Obama can do to stop it. It has been decades in the making. It cannot be undone with a trillion or two trillion dollars in bailout money. Our empire is dying. Our economy has collapsed.

How will we cope with our decline? Will we cling to the absurd dreams of a superpower and a glorious tomorrow, or will we responsibly face our stark new limitations? Will we heed those who are sober and rational, those who speak of a new simplicity and humility, or will we follow the demagogues and charlatans who rise up out of the slime in moments of crisis to offer fantastical visions? Will we radically transform our system into one that protects the ordinary citizen and fosters the common good, that defies the corporate state, or will we employ the brutality and technology of our internal security and surveillance apparatus to crush all dissent? We won't have to wait long to find out.

There are a few isolated individuals who saw it coming. The political philosophers Sheldon Wolin, John Ralston Saul, and Andrew Bacevich, as well as writers such as Noam Chomsky, Chalmers Johnson, David Korten, and Naomi Klein, along with activists such as Bill McKibben, and Ralph Nader, rang the alarm bells. They were largely ignored or ridiculed. Our corporate media and corporate universities proved, when we needed them most, intellectually and morally useless.

In his book *Democracy Incorporated*, Wolin, who taught political philosophy at the University of California at Berkeley and at Princeton, uses the phrase *inverted totalitarianism* to describe our system of power. Inverted totalitarianism, unlike classical totalitarianism, does not revolve around a demagogue or charismatic leader. It finds its expression in the anonymity of the corporate state. It purports to cherish democracy, patriotism, and the Constitution while cynically manipulating internal levers to subvert and thwart democratic institutions. Citizens do elect political candidates, but those candidates must raise staggering amounts of corporate funds to compete. They are beholden to armies of corporate lobbyists in Washington or state capitals who write the legislation. Corporate media control nearly everything we read, watch or hear and impose a bland uniformity of opinion or divert us with trivia and celebrity gossip. In classical totalitarian regimes, such as Nazi fascism or Soviet communism, economics was subordinate to politics. "Under inverted totalitarianism the reverse

true,” Wolin writes. “Economics dominates politics—and with that domination comes different forms of ruthlessness.”¹

I reached Wolin, 86, by phone at his home about twenty-five miles north of San Francisco. He was bombardier in the South Pacific during World War II and went to Harvard after the war to get his doctorate. Wolin has written classics such as *Politics and Vision* and *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*. His newest, *Democracy Incorporated*, is one of the most important and prescient critiques of the American political system. He is also the author of a series of remarkable essays on Augustine of Hippo, Richard Hooker, David Hume, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Max Weber, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and John Dewey. His voice, however, has faded from public awareness because, as he told me, “it is harder and harder for people like me to get a public hearing.” He said that publications, such as the *New York Review of Books*, that had often published his work a couple decades ago, lost interest in his critiques of American capitalism, his warnings about the subversion of democratic institutions and the emergence of the corporate state. He does not hold out much hope for Obama.

“The basic systems are going to stay in place; they are too powerful to be challenged,” Wolin told me when I asked him about the then-new Obama administration:

This is shown by the financial bailout. It does not bother with the structure at all. I don’t think Obama can take on the kind of military establishment we have developed. This is not to say that I do not admire him. He is probably the most intelligent president we have had in decades. I think he is well-meaning, but he inherits a system of constraints that makes it very difficult to take on these major power configurations. I do not think he has the appetite for it in any ideological sense. The corporate structure is not going to be challenged. There has not been a word from him that would suggest an attempt to rethink the American imperium.

Wolin argues that a failure to dismantle our vast and overextended imperial projects, coupled with the economic collapse, is likely to result in inverted totalitarianism. He said that without “radical and drastic remedies” the response to mounting discontent and social unrest will probably lead to greater state control and repression. There will be, he warned, a huge “expansion of government power.”

“Our political culture has remained unhelpful in fostering a democratic consciousness,” he said. “The political system and its operatives will not be constrained by popular discontent or uprisings.”

Wolin writes that in inverted totalitarianism consumer goods and a comfortable standard of living along with a vast entertainment industry that provides spectacles and diversions, keep the citizen politically passive. I asked if the economic collapse and the steady decline in our standard of living might not, in fact, trigger classical totalitarianism. Could widespread frustration and poverty lead the working and middle classes to place their faith in demagogues, especially those from the Christian Right?

“I think that’s perfectly possible,” he answered:

That was the experience of the 1930s. There wasn’t just FDR. There was Huey Long and Father Coughlin. There were even more extreme movements including the Klan. The extent to which the forces can be fed by the downturn and bleakness is a very real danger. It could become classic totalitarianism.

He said the current widespread political passivity is dangerous. It is often exploited by demagogues who pose as saviors and offer dreams of glory and salvation. He warned that the apoliticalness, even anti-politicalness, will be very powerful elements in taking us towards

radically dictatorial direction. It testifies to how thin the commitment to democracy is in the present circumstances. Democracy is not ascendant. It is not dominant. It is beleaguered. The extent to which young people have been drawn away from public concerns and given this extraordinary range of diversions makes it very likely they could then rally to a demagogue.

Wolin lamented that the corporate state has successfully blocked any real debate about alternative forms of power. Corporations determine who gets heard and who does not, he said. And those who critique corporate power are given no place in the national dialogue.

“In the 1930s there were all kinds of alternative understandings, from socialism to more extensive governmental involvement,” he said:

There was a range of different approaches. But what I am struck by now is the narrow range within which palliatives are being modeled. We are supposed to work with the financial system. So the people who helped create this system are put in charge of the solution. There has to be some major effort to think outside the box.

“The puzzle to me is the lack of social unrest,” Wolin said when I asked why we have not yet seen rioting or protests. He said he worried that popular protests will be dismissed and ignored by the corporate media. This, he said, is what happened when tens of thousands protested the war in Iraq. This will permit the state to suppress local protests ruthlessly, as happened during past Democratic and Republican national conventions during election years. Antiwar protests in the 1960s gained momentum from their ability to spread across the country, he noted. Such dynamics, he said, may not happen this time. “The ways they can isolate protests and prevent it from [becoming] a contagion are formidable,” he said.

“My greatest fear is that the Obama administration will achieve relatively little in terms of structural change,” he added:

They may at best keep the system going. But there is a growing pessimism. Every day we hear how much longer the recession will continue. They are already talking about beyond next year. The economic difficulties are more profound than we had guessed and because of globalization more difficult to deal with. I wish the political establishment, the parties and leadership, would become more aware of the depths of the problem. They can't keep throwing money at this. They have to begin structural changes that involve a very different approach from a market economy. I don't think that will happen.

“I keep asking why and how and when this country became so conservative,” he went on. “The country once prided itself on its experimentation and flexibility. It has become rigid. It is probably the most conservative of all the advanced countries.”

The American Left, he said, has crumbled. It sold out to a bankrupt Democratic Party, abandoned the working class, and has no ability to organize. Unions are a spent force. The universities are milquetoast for corporate employees. The media churn out info-entertainment or fatuous pundits. The Left, he said, no longer has the capacity to be a counterweight to the corporate state. He said that if an extreme Right gains momentum there will probably be very little organized resistance.

“The Left is amorphous,” he said. “I despair over the Left. Left parties may be small in number in Europe, but they are a coherent organization that keeps going. Here, except for Nader's efforts, we don't have that. We have a few voices here, a magazine there, and that's about it. It goes nowhere.”

The False Idol of Unfettered Capitalism

MARCH 15, 2009

When I returned to New York City after nearly two decades as a foreign correspondent in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkans, I was unsure where I was headed. I lacked the emotional and physical resilience that had allowed me to cope as a war correspondent. I was plagued by memories I wanted to forget, waking suddenly in the middle of the night, my sleep shattered by visions of gunfire and death. I was alienated from those around me, unaccustomed to the common language and images imposed by consumer culture, unable to communicate the pain and suffering I had witnessed, not much interested in building a career.

It was at this time that the Brooklyn Academy of Music began showing a ten-part film series called *The Decalogue*. *Deka*, in Greek, means “ten,” and *logos* means “saying” or “speech.” The Decalogue is the classical name of the Ten Commandments. The director was the Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski, who had made the trilogy *Three Colors*, consisting of the films *White*, *Blue*, and *Red*. The ten films of *The Decalogue*, each about an hour long and based on one of the commandments, were to be shown two at a time over five consecutive weeks. I saw them on Sunday nights, taking the subway to Brooklyn, its cars rocking and screeching along the tracks in the darkened tunnels. The theater was rarely more than half full.

The films were quiet, subtle, and often opaque. It was sometimes hard to tell which commandment was being addressed. The characters never spoke about the commandments directly. They were too busy, as we all are, coping with life. The stories presented the lives of ordinary people confronted by extraordinary events. All lived in a Warsaw housing complex, many of them neighbors. They were on a common voyage, yet also out of touch with the pain and dislocation of those around them. The commandments, Kieślowski understood, were not dusty relics of another age, but rather a powerful compass with vital contemporary resonance.

In film after film he dealt with the core violation raised by each of the commandments. He freed the commandments from the clutter of piety and narrow definitions imposed upon them by religious leaders and institutions. Magda, the promiscuous woman portrayed in *Decalogue VI*, the film about adultery, was not married. She had a series of empty, carnal relationships. For Kieślowski, adultery, at its deepest level, was sex without love. Michał, the father in *Decalogue IV*, the film about honoring our parents, was not the biological father of his daughter, Anka. The biological mother was absent from the daughter's life. Parenting, Kieślowski knew, is not defined by blood or birth or gender. It is defined by commitment, fidelity and love. In *Decalogue V*, the film about killing, Jacek, an unemployed drifter, robs and brutally murders a cab driver. He is caught, sentenced and executed by the state. Kieślowski forces us to confront the barbarity of murder, whether committed by a deranged individual or sanctioned by society.

I knew the commandments. I had learned them at Sunday school, listened to sermons based on the commandments from my father's pulpit, and studied them as a seminarian at Harvard Divinity School.

But Kieślowski turned them into living, breathing entities.

~~“For six thousand years these rules have been unquestionably right,” Kieślowski said of the commandments:~~

And yet we break them every day. We know what we should do, and yet we fail to live as we should. People feel that something is wrong in life. There is some kind of atmosphere that makes people turn now to other values. They want to contemplate the basic questions of life, and that is probably the reason for wanting to tell these stories.²

In eight of the films there was a brief appearance by a young man, solemn and silent. Kieślowski said he did not know who the character was. Perhaps he was an angel or Christ. Perhaps he represents the divine presence who observed with profound sadness the tragedy and folly we humans commit against others and against ourselves.

“He’s not very pleased with us,” was all the director said.

The commandments are a list of religious edicts, according to passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy, given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai. The first four are designed to guide the believer toward a proper relationship with God. The remaining six deal with our relations with others. It is these final six commands that are given the negative form of *You Shall Not*. Only two of the commandments, the prohibitions against stealing and murder, are incorporated into our legal code. Protestants, Catholics, and Jews have compiled slightly different lists, but the essence of the commandments remains the same. Muslims, while they do not list the commandments in the Koran, honor the laws of Moses, whom they see as a prophet.

The commandments are not defined, however, by the three monotheistic faiths. They are one of the earliest attempts to lay down moral rules and guidelines to sustain a human community. Nearly every religion has set down an ethical and moral code that is strikingly similar to the Ten Commandments. The Eightfold Path, known within Buddhism as the Wheel of Law, forbids murder, unchastity, theft, falsehood, and, especially, covetous desire. *Om*, the Hindus’ Sacred Syllable, said or sung before and after prayers, ends with a fourth sound beyond the range of human hearing. This sound is called the “sound of silence.” It is also called “the sound of the universe.” Hindus, in the repetition of the Sacred Syllable, try to go beyond thought, to reach the stillness and silence that constitutes God. Five of the Ten Commandments delivered from Mount Sinai are lifted directly from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. No human being, no nation, no religion, has been chosen to be the sole interpreter of mystery. All cultures struggle to give words to the experience of the transcendent. It is a reminder that all of us find God not in what we know, but in what we cannot comprehend.

The commandments include the most severe violations and moral dilemmas in human life, although these violations often lie beyond the scope of the law. They were for the ancients, and are for us, the core rules that, when honored, hold us together, and when dishonored lead to alienation, discord, and violence. When our lives are shattered by tragedy, suffering, and pain, or when we express or feel the ethereal and overwhelming power of love, we confront the mystery of good and evil. Voices across time and cultures have struggled to transmit and pay homage to this mystery, what it means for our lives and our place in the cosmos. These voices, whether in the teachings of the Buddha, the writings of the Latin poets, or the pages of the Koran, are part of our common struggle as human beings to acknowledge the eternal and the sacred, to create an ethical system to sustain life.

The commandments retain their power because they express something fundamental about the human condition. This is why they are important. The commandments choose us. We are rarely able to choose them. We do not, however hard we work to insulate ourselves, ultimately control our fate. We

cannot save ourselves from betrayal, theft, envy, greed, deception, and murder, nor always from the impulses that propel us to commit these acts. These violations, which can strike us or be committed without warning, can leave deep, often lifelong wounds. There are few of us who do not wrestle deeply with at least one of these violations.

We all stray. We all violate some commandments and do not adequately honor others. We are human. But moral laws bind us and make it possible to build a society based on the common good. They keep us from honoring the false covenants of greed, celebrity, and power that destroy us. These false covenants have a powerful appeal. They offer feelings of strength, status, and a false sense of belonging. They tempt us to be God. They tell us the things we want to hear and believe. They appeal to make us the center of the universe. But these false covenants, covenants built around exclusive communities of race, gender, class, religion, and nation, inevitably carry within them the denigration and abuse of others. These false covenants divide us. A moral covenant recognizes that all life is sacred and love alone is the force that makes life possible.

It is the unmentioned fear of death, the one that rattles with the wind through the heavy branches of the trees outside, which frightens us the most, even as we do not name this fear. It is death we are trying to flee. The smallness of our lives, the transitory nature of existence, the inevitable road to old age, are what the idols of power, celebrity, and wealth tell us we can escape. They are tempting and seductive. They assure us that we need not endure the pain and suffering of being human. We follow the idol and barter away our freedom. We place our identity and our hopes in the hands of the idol. We need the idol to define ourselves, to determine our status and place. We invest in the idol. We sell ourselves into bondage.

The consumer goods we amass, the status we seek in titles and positions, the ruthlessness we employ to advance our careers, the personal causes we champion, the money we covet, and the houses we build and the cars we drive become our pathetic statements of being. They are squalid little monuments to our selves. The more we strive to amass power and possessions, the more intolerant and anxious we become. Impulses and emotions, not thoughts but mass feelings, propel us forward. The impulses, carefully manipulated by a consumer society, see us intoxicated with patriotic fervor and lust for war, a desire to vote for candidates who appeal to us emotionally or to buy this car or that brand. Politicians, advertisers, social scientists, television evangelists, the news media, and the entertainment industry have learned what makes us respond. It works. None of us are immune. But when we act in their interests, we are rarely acting in our own. The moral philosophies we have ignored, once a staple of a liberal arts education, are a check on the deluge. They call us toward mutual respect and self-sacrifice. They force us to confront the broad, disturbing questions about meaning and existence. And our callous refusal to heed these questions as a society allowed us to believe that unfettered capitalism and the free market were forces of nature, decrees passed down from the divine, the only routes to prosperity and power. They turned out to be idols, and like all idols they have now demanded their human sacrifice.

Moral laws were not written so they could be practiced by some and not by others. They call on all of us to curb our worst instincts so we can live together, to refrain from committing acts of egregious exploitation that spread suffering. Moral teachings are guideposts. They keep us, even when we stray as we all do, on the right path.

The strange, disjointed fragments of our lives can be comprehended only when we acknowledge our insecurities and uncertainties, when we accept that we will never know what life is about or what it is supposed to mean. We must do the best we can, not for ourselves, the great moralists remind us, but for those around us. Trust is the compound that unites us. The only lasting happiness in life comes

with giving life to others. The quality of our life, of all life, is determined by what we give and how much we sacrifice. We live not by exalting our own life but by being willing to lose it.

The moral life, in the end, will not protect us from evil. The moral life protects us, however, from committing evil. It is designed to check our darker impulses, warning us that pandering to impulses can have terrible consequences. It seeks to hold community together. It is community that gives our lives, even in pain and grief, a healing solidarity. It is fealty to community that frees us from the dictates of our idols, idols that promise us fulfillment through self-gratification. These moral laws are about freedom. They call us to reject and defy powerful forces that rule our lives and to live instead for others, even if this costs us status and prestige and wealth.

Turn away from the moral life and you end in disaster. You sink into a morass of self-absorption and greed. You breed a society that celebrates fraud, theft, and violence, you turn neighbor against neighbor, you confuse presentation and image with your soul. Moral rules are as imperative as sustaining a community as law. And all cultures have sought to remind us of these basic moral restraints, ones that invariably tell us that successful communities do not permit their members to exploit one another but rather ensure that they sacrifice for the common good. The economic and social collapse we face was presaged by a moral collapse. And our response must include a renewed reverence for moral and social imperatives that acknowledge the sanctity of the common good.

The German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "Tell me *how* you seek and I will tell you *what* you are seeking."³ We all are seekers, even if we do not always know what we are looking to find. We are all seekers, even if we do not always know how to frame the questions. In those questions, even more than the answers, we find hope in the strange and contradictory fragments of our lives. And it is by recovering these moral questions, too often dismissed or ignored in universities and boardrooms across the country, laughed at on the stock exchange, ridiculed on reality television as an impediment to money and celebrity, that we will again find it possible to be whole.

Resist or Become Serfs

APRIL 6, 2009

America is devolving into a Third-World nation. And if we do not immediately halt our elite rapacious looting of the public treasury, we will be left with trillions in debt that can never be repaid and widespread human misery that we will be helpless to ameliorate. Our anemic democracy will be replaced with a robust national police state. The elite will withdraw into heavily guarded gated communities where they will have access to security, goods, and services that cannot be afforded by the rest of us. Tens of millions of people, brutally controlled, will live in perpetual poverty. This is the inevitable result of unchecked corporate capitalism. The stimulus and bailout plans are not about saving us. They are about saving them. We can resist—which means street protests, disruptions of the system, and demonstrations—or become serfs.

We have been in a steady economic decline for decades. The Canadian political philosopher John Ralston Saul detailed this decline in his 1992 book *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West*. David Cay Johnston exposed the mirage and rot of American capitalism in *Free Lunch: How the Wealthiest Americans Enrich Themselves at Government Expense (and Stick You With the Bill)*, and David C. Korten, in *When Corporations Rule the World* and *Agenda for a New Economy*, laid out corporate malfeasance and abuse. But our universities and mass media, entranced by power and naively believing that global capitalism was an unstoppable force of nature, rarely asked the right questions or gave a prominent voice to those who did. Our elites hid their incompetence and loss of control behind an arrogant facade of specialized jargon and obscure economic theories.

The lies employed to camouflage the economic decline are legion. President Ronald Reagan included 1.5 million U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine service personnel with the civilian workforce to magically reduce the nation's unemployment rate by two percent. President Bill Clinton decided that those who had given up looking for work, or those who wanted full-time jobs but could find only part-time employment, were no longer to be counted as unemployed. This trick disappeared some five million unemployed from the official unemployment rolls. If you work more than twenty-one hours a week—most low-wage workers at places like Wal-Mart average twentyeight hours a week—you are counted as employed, although your real wages put you below the poverty line. Our actual unemployment rate, when you include those who have stopped looking for work and those who can find only part-time jobs, is not 8.5 percent but 15 percent. A sixth of the country is now effectively unemployed. And we are shedding jobs at a faster rate than in the months after the 1929 crash.

The consumer price index (CPI), used by the government to measure inflation, is meaningless. To keep the official inflation figures low, the government has been substituting basic products it once measured to check for inflation with ones that do not rise very much in price. This sleight of hand has kept the cost-of-living increases tied to the CPI artificially low. *New York Times* consumer reporter W.P. Dunleavy, wrote that her groceries now cost \$587 a month, up from \$400 a year earlier. This is a forty percent increase. California economist John Williams, who runs an organization called Shado

Statistics, contends that if Washington still used the CPI measurements applied back in the 1970s, inflation would be at ten percent.

The corporate state, and the political and intellectual class that served the corporate state, constructed a financial and political system based on illusions. Corporations engaged in pyramid lending that created fictitious assets. These fictitious assets became collateral for more bank lending. The elite skimmed off hundreds of millions in bonuses, commissions, and salaries from this fictitious wealth. Politicians, who dutifully served corporate interests rather than those of citizens, were showered with campaign contributions and given lucrative jobs when they left office. Universities, knowing it was not good business to challenge corporatism, muted any voices of conscience when they went begging for corporate donations and grants. Deceptive loans and credit card debt fueled the binges of a consumer society and hid falling wages and the loss of manufacturing jobs.

The Obama administration, rather than chart a new course, is intent on re-inflating the bubble. Trillions of dollars of government funds being spent to sustain these corrupt corporations could have renovated our economy. We could have saved tens of millions of Americans from poverty. The government could have, as consumer activist Ralph Nader has pointed out, started ten new banks with \$35 billion each and a ten-to-one leverage to open credit markets. Vast, unimaginable sums are being placed into these dirty, corporate hands without oversight. And they will use this money as they always have—to enrich themselves at our expense.

“You are going to see the biggest waste, fraud, and abuse in American history,” Nader warned when I asked about the bailouts:

Not only is it wrongly directed, not only does it deal with the perpetrators instead of the people who were victimized, but they don't have a delivery system of any honesty and efficiency. The Justice Department is overwhelmed. It doesn't have a tenth of the prosecutors, the investigators, the auditors, the attorneys needed to deal with the previous corporate crime wave before the bailout started last September. It is especially unable to deal with the rapacious ravaging of this new money by the corporate recipients. You can see it already. The corporations haven't lent it. They have used some of it for acquisitions or to preserve their bonuses or their dividends. As long as they know they are not going to jail, and they don't see many newspaper reports about their colleagues going to jail, they don't care. It is total impunity. If they quit, they quit with a golden parachute. Even [General Motors CEO Rick] Wagoner is taking away \$21 million.

A handful of former executives have conceded that the bailouts are a waste. Maurice Greenberg, former chairman of American International Group Inc. (AIG), told the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee on April 2, 2009, that the effort to prop up the firm with \$170 billion had “failed.” He said the company should be restructured. AIG, he said, would have been better off filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection instead of seeking government help.

“These are signs of hyper-decay,” Nader said from his office in Washington. “You spend this kind of money and do not know if it will work.”

“Bankrupt corporate capitalism is on its way to bankrupting the socialism that is trying to save it,” Nader added. “That is the end stage. If they no longer have socialism to save them then we are in feudalism. We are into private police, gated communities and serfs with a twenty-first-century nomenclature.”

We will not be able to raise another three or four trillion dollars, especially with commitments totaling some \$12 trillion, to fix the mess. Not long ago, such profligate government spending was unthinkable. A year before the bailouts began, the entire Federal Reserve was evaluated at only \$80

billion. The economic stimulus and the bailouts will not bring back our casino capitalism. And as the meltdown shows no signs of abating, and the bailouts show no sign of working, the recklessness and desperation of our capitalist overlords have increased. The cost, to the working and middle classes, is becoming unsustainable. The Fed reported in March 2009 that households lost \$5.1 trillion, or nine percent, of their wealth in the last three months of 2008, the most ever in a single quarter in the fifty-seven-year history of record-keeping by the central bank. For the full year, household wealth dropped \$11.1 trillion, or about eighteen percent. These figures did not include the decline of investments in the stock market, which has probably erased trillions more in the country's collective net worth.

The bullet to our heads, inevitable if we do not radically alter course, will be sudden. We have been borrowing at the rate of more than \$2 billion a day over the last ten years, and at some point it has to stop. The moment China, the oil-rich states, and other international investors stop buying U.S. Treasury Bonds, the dollar will become junk. Inflation will rocket upward. We will become Weimar Germany. A furious and sustained backlash by a betrayed and angry populace, one unprepared intellectually and psychologically for collapse, will sweep aside the Democrats and most of the Republicans. A cabal of protofascist misfits, from Christian demagogues to simpletons like Sarah Palin to loudmouth talk-show hosts, whom their opponents naively dismiss as buffoons, will find a following with promises of revenge and moral renewal. The elites, the ones with their Harvard Business School degrees and expensive vocabularies, will retreat into their sheltered enclaves of privilege and comfort. We will be left bereft and abandoned outside the gates.

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