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Growing Up Insane in America

Par William Hawes
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The current state of American politics must make us question whether any of our leaders in the Beltway can be described as "grown-ups", i.e., fully mature and sane individuals. Between the endless war crimes, corporate corruption, lobbyists who bribe congressmen and write legislation, and the ineptitude of federal entities who are supposed to protect our health such as the FDA, EPA, and CDC, it would appear that leaders in all three branches of government, as well as the leaders of the corporate world, are either insane, suffer from various psychological disorders, as well as suffering from a type of collective hallucination, the common denominator being an utter lack of empathy for others humans, or respect for the Earth.

Further, we must at least question whether collectively, we the citizenry, are as susceptible to mass delusions as our psychopathic leaders are. Our society can be effectively generalized as forming what Paulo Freire calls a *culture of silence*, many of whom see no problems with exploiting and despoiling other countries, looting wealth, and killing millions; and many more that are simply afraid to speak out against the indignity of the US empire, in fear of socio-cultural reprisals. This culture of silence, which we are taught at a young age, indoctrinates and effectively eliminates the ability of people to form critiques of our rotten political and economic systems. This is who Richard Nixon was really referring to, when he spoke of the "Silent Majority": citizens too naïve, dumb, childlike, and afraid to confront the injustices inherent to our system were exactly who Tricky Dick was appealing to.

While many of us pretend that something as silly as "American exceptionalism" exists, and fall victim to the myth of rugged individualism that permeates all aspects of civic life and economics, the sad truth is that we've become a nation of petulant children. While we fantasize about Jeffersonian notions of small businesses and republicanism guiding our way of life, transnational conglomerates control our agricultural output (killing us slowly with GMOs and pesticides) and our media landscape (brainwashing us with neoliberalism and black propaganda).

Marx and Engels tuned us into the ideological war imposed by capitalism, which distorts and confuses workers' belief systems, alienates workers from themselves and their work, and attempts by subterfuge to shift the blame of ruthless exploitation away from the ruling class. This was called *false consciousness,* and later, Sartre used the term *mauvaise foi* ("bad faith"). Gramsci defined the ideological control of capitalists over the socioeconomic system as *cultural hegemony.* Many readers are intimately familiar with these ideas. So why does this critique of the left from John Steinbeck still ring so true:

> I guess the trouble was that we didn't have any self-admitted proletarians. Everyone was a temporarily embarrassed capitalist.

As Paul Goodman explained so lucidly, we've all been *Growing Up Absurd* for generations, trapping many in the chrysalis of adolescence for their entire lives. As he pointed out:

> The accumulation of the missed and compromised revolutions of modern times, with their consequent ambiguities and social imbalances, has fallen, and must fall, most heavily on the young, making it hard to grow up.

There is no mystery why Goodman entitles his chapter on missed revolutions in the fields of the physical environment, the socioeconomic model, political and constitutional reform, morality, and reforms dealing with children and youth, "The Missing Community". For youth today, just as in his day, have few responsible role models, a repressive and prison-like atmosphere in schools, with consumerism and technology determining every aspect of a child's search for joy and wonder, and now, the artificial edifices of social media and "augmented reality" is replacing genuine interaction. Indoctrinated to fit into a system of war, corporate monopolies, vapid pop culture, and not encouraged to think critical about their country or world cultures, children become jaded as soon as they realize that the notions of freedom, equality, and sharing that their parents and teachers taught them were based on lies. We must reverse this tide, lest we forget Walter Benjamin's saying that:

Behind every fascism, there is a failed revolution.

As Derrick Jensen says, our society suffers from a form of complex PTSD:

> PTSD is an embodied response to extreme trauma, to extreme terror, to the loss of control, connection, and meaning…Faced with any emotionally threatening situation, these people may freeze, failing to resist even when resistance becomes feasible or necessary. (1)

This condition permeates every aspect of society, and reinforces our deepest ideological confusions: the line between personal property and coercive private property is purposely blurred by the bourgeoisie, fulfillment is replaced by "fun", civic duty is replaced by retreating into the shell of private life, and diplomacy is usurped by war. Brought up in such a totality of fear and violence, it is no surprise that many never progress psychically beyond the stage of the child, or to seek out fulfillment instead of base entertainment.

The wit of the novelist Trevanian is instructive when addressing the Western symptoms of ennui and anomie:

> It's not Americans I find annoying, its Americanism: a social disease of the post-industrial world that must inevitably infect each of the mercantile nations in turn, and is called 'American' only because your nation is the most advanced case of the malady, much as one speaks of Spanish flu…Its symptoms are a loss of work ethic, a shrinking of inner resources, and a constant need for external stimulation, followed by spiritual decay and moral narcosis. You can recognize the victim by his constant efforts to get in touch with himself, to believe his spiritual feebleness is an interesting psychological warp, to construe his fleeing from responsibility as evidence that he and his life are uniquely open to new experience. In the latter stages, the sufferer is reduced to seeking that most trivial of activities: fun. (2)

This is corroborated by Jean Liedloff, whose experiences with the Yequana and Sanema tribes of Venezuela allows her to contrast their indigenous traditions and child-rearing with the failure of civilized parents, and the resulting insipid, infantile behavior of Western adults and general culture:

> Novelty…is so much a part of the present phase in our culture that our natural resistance to change has been distorted…Nothing is ever allowed to be good enough, nothing ever satisfactory. Our underlying discontent is channeled into desire for the latest things…Among the things high on the list are those that save labor…When success as a passive baby has not been experienced, there is a penchant for button-pushing, for labor-saving, as an assurance that everything is being done for, and nothing expected of, the subject…The impulse to work, necessarily a strong one in a healthy continuum, is stunted…Work becomes what it is to most of us: a resented necessity. And the labor-saving gadget gleams with a promise of lost comfort. In the meantime, a solution to the discrepancy between the adult desire to utilize one's abilities and the infantile desire to be useless is often found in something aptly called recreation. (3)

The implications are clear: our culture does not allow us to grow up, because to do so would invoke a critical response and a revolution against the forces of tyranny. Recently, Henry Giroux asked:

> Where are the agents of democracy and the public spaces that offer hope in such dark times? What role will progressives play at a time when the very ability of the public's ability to translate private troubles into broader systemic issues is disappearing? How might politics itself be rethought in order to address the pedagogical and structural conditions that contribute to the growing intensification of violence in all spheres of American society? What role should intellectuals, cultural workers, artists, writers, journalists, and others play as part of a broader struggle to reclaim a democratic imaginary and exercise a collective sense of civic courage?

First, we must accept the fact that *each of us* is an agent of democracy, and we must reclaim the public spaces, and smack down the harmful myth regarding "The Tragedy of the Commons". The answers to Giroux's plea lie in our ability to raise healthy, strong children who are not seduced by the siren calls of capitalism and patriotic-approved state violence. This should be supplemented by alternative education programs for children and adults, and basic life and practical lessons passed down from parents, grandparents, etc. This doesn't mean each parent has to teach their kid trigonometry. It means each town has to model itself to promote a viable village atmosphere, and foster a sense of community, with renewable energy, grassroots arts and music, and small to medium scale organic agriculture. It will mean embracing the truth that industrial civilization is destroying the world, and rather than wallowing in self-pity at having our illusions destroyed, rising up and embracing a culture based on ecology, enlightenment, and virtuous edification of our youth.

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Notes:

1.) Jensen, Derrick. *Endgame: The Problem of Civilization, Vol. 1.* Seven Stories Press, 2006. p. 69-70.

2.) Trevanian. *Shibumi.* Three Rivers Press, 1979. p. 306

3.) Liedloff, Jean. *The Continuum Concept: In Search of Happiness Lost.* Da Capo Press, 1975. p. 114-115.

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