

Pointing the Finger of Responsibility

by Bill Herbst

*Version 1.1 (posted on 23 July 2019)
© 2019 by the author, all rights reserved*

Over the past week, I've read four different articles/essays online penned by writers who are all assertive social critics and whose political/cultural lean is decidedly to the left. These are "my people" — I have little interest in commentary coming from the right, whether center-right, far-right, or looney-tunes-crazy right. And yet, I don't always agree with the opinions I read from the left. The four articles I read this week comprise a case in point.

Each article was about assessing responsibility for the vicious mess we're in. That's a theme that matters to me — *How did we fall into all our various current predicaments? And what forces are keeping us stuck in the status quo?* That's why I read the articles in the first place.

Although each author had his/her particular slant, all four articles shared a similar perspective, namely, that humanity as a whole is not to blame for our dire situation. Their analysis (and opinion) was that responsibility for the crises of climate change, wealth inequality, social injustice, gender conflict, racism, war, and the other ills that beset civilization is largely concentrated into specific sectors. A couple of the articles squarely blamed capitalism as an economic and philosophical system that has wreaked havoc and continues to do so. The other two pointed the finger of responsibility at a relatively small percentage of human beings, basically, the wealthy and powerful elites (plutocrats and oligarchs) who make policy, create narratives, and, in essence, run the world for their own and their cronies' monetary gain through economic and geopolitical dominance. The millions of lesser minions who support these supreme thugs in various bureaucracies both visible and invisible were also indicted. But regular people were let off the hook.

One article even referenced something I've included recently in my own commentaries — the well-known quote from the comic strip Pogo, "*We have met the enemy, and he is us.*" The author disagreed. According to her, the enemy was not "us," (meaning the overwhelming percentage of regular human beings who go about their daily lives without wealth, power and prestige) it was "them" — the rulers, whether official or de facto.

This particular article was well-written, deftly walking the line between gravitas and entertainment, which included the presumption that people have been

overtly and covertly manipulated for so long and in such a powerfully successful manner (through narrative and propaganda by the rulers) that the masses are now effectively hypnotized. The assertion was that ordinary people are not unconscious or "asleep," but rather seduced by the perpetual onslaught of lies and bullshit stories that surround us and infect the media. In effect, the article reflected the assumptions of the Nuremberg War Trials following World War Two. The victorious allies knew that indicting the entire German population for crimes against humanity wasn't a workable solution — what were we supposed to do, execute every German citizen? Stalin might have chosen that, but Churchill and Truman wouldn't. Instead, the Tribunal went after the leaders, the ultimate and penultimate higher-ups in the Nazi hierarchy.

I understand the author's perspective, and I'm sympathetic to that point of view. Yes, we've been manipulated seven ways from Sunday, and it's been going on since civilization began 12,000 years ago. Hell, I've written often that the great triumph of western psychology in the 20th century was not in therapy and human wellness but in propaganda, advertising, and mass mind control.

Also, I appreciated in that article and the other three the authors' generosity toward human beings in the implication that most people are essentially good, and that the darker side of our nature emerges only when corrupted or manipulated. That's a lovely perspective that I try to embrace whenever possible.

And yet, the conclusion of all four articles — in the presumption of innocence and exoneration of humanity in general — is challenging for me. While I agree to some extent, I do not feel and cannot give *unconditional* approval to that judgment. I'm conflicted by the complexities of our collective situation, especially in my observation of complicity damn near everywhere I look.

The other day, I was standing in a line at the post office and overheard three people in front of me in line strike up a conversation about vacation cruises they had taken recently with partners, friends, and family — specifically, river cruises in Europe and ocean cruises to Alaska. All three were older Americans about my age, and they were clearly well-off enough economically to afford such vacations. My inner and unstated reaction was not "*Good for you! Do all the global travel you can while it's still possible!*" No, my private reaction was, "*Gee, that's a bit on the selfish side and more than a little irresponsible.*"

Does this make me a jerk? A judgmental asshole? Maybe, but the five-minute conversation I overheard contained not a single reference to fossil fuels or to any conflicts about privilege. If they felt any qualms about taking these cruises, they sure as hell didn't let on. They spoke only about what they liked and didn't like about the cruises. Admittedly, these were strangers at a post office, so we wouldn't expect a heartfelt or particularly revealing conversation, but their verbal attitude was *exclusively* self-centered. I found that disappointing.

OK, I understand that had these people *not* gone on the cruises, it wouldn't have mattered one whit in terms of global warming or environmental toxicity. The cruises would have happened anyway. That is true of all individual efforts at socially-responsible choices about how to live. Nothing any individual does or doesn't do will impact the juggernaut of climate disruption and ecological destruction. But personal integrity is still worth considering. Doing what one can is healthy for the psyche and good for the heart, even if it won't save the world.

More than that, if climate change is to be addressed at all by our fundamentally changing the current economic and political systems and the toxic ways we live, the ruling elites will never even begin to take on those tasks by choice. They will have to be forced into change by mass pressure from below their lofty perches.

That's where a grassroots climate mobilization comes into play as a necessity. If enough people demand change in the ways we conduct business and organize society — enough being perhaps 15% of the population applying active pressure and another 35% adding more passive support — we *might* have chance to alter our trajectory toward sanity and balance. We don't need universal activism or 100% agreement. Half the people is enough. Even with that, we'll probably need to suffer some serious instances of mother nature's wrath that involve major human suffering — not just isolated instances, but really terrible developments that affect millions. The ruling elites will never listen to reason alone; only widespread human tragedy will get their attention. So, it's likely that a combination of both citizen activism and major disasters will be required make possible the sweeping changes that are necessary. And, of course, there's no guarantee that the response will be sane even then, but it's our best chance.

Look, I understand that people will always want to talk about careers, jobs, and livelihood, about how to earn enough to pay the mortgage or the rent. And our fantasies, dreams, and drives for personal enrichment and pleasure aren't going away. Yes, all that's hard-wired under the heading of self-interest, as are so many other topics that impact our individual lives. But talking about what we want for our own personal gratification and how we're going to get it, well, I've heard just about as much of that as I can stand. Personal desires and needs may have been fine topics for the past 200,000 years, but they're not anymore.

OK, I get it that damned few of us could or would want to relocate to a simple cabin in the woods or on the shore to live without electricity or running water. A majority of us do not (and will not) grow our own vegetable gardens or forage for food. All that is much more than most of us can take on. But how we live collectively has become poisonous — both to ourselves and to the planet — and open, ongoing conversations about that need to happen on a daily basis, not as a vaguely anxious and unstated background to all our interactions with others.

The problem as I see it is not that everyone bears equal responsibility for human madness. No, some institutions are indeed more guilty than others and should be

held accountable (agribusiness, the fossil fuel industry, and the military, to cite three examples). Just like the authors of the four articles I read this week, I too point the finger of responsibility at the ruling elites who value wealth and power above all else. But, having said that, I can't escape or ignore my perception that the rest of us are complicit in the crime. It's like a multi-car smash-up on the freeway, where everyone who drives by in the moments after gawks at the tragedy, staring at the crumpled, burning vehicles, noting the bodies and blood on the pavement, but not realizing that the pile-up was caused by an earthquake, and that they too are about to be swallowed up.

So, while I am sympathetic to the plight of billions of people who are caught in cruel economic and social systems they didn't create and feel powerless to change, I am also profoundly disturbed by our collective complicity (mine included). Saying that we are merely unwitting victims of mass hypnosis is akin to "good" Germans in 1946 saying that they knew nothing about the horrors of the Holocaust, or that they were only "following orders." They went along, often enthusiastically, and they were complicit in the crimes designed and initiated by their masters. I'm not suggesting that they — or we — should be punished, only that we need to admit that we participated, even if passively. Ignorance or unconsciousness is no excuse.

We don't have to sacrifice everything out of guilt, and we sure as hell aren't expected as individuals to know what to do to dismantle the machine and save ourselves, but we'd damn well better not remain silent about it.