

# The Unraveling

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*Version 1.5 (posted on 19 May 2020)  
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Pick any arena of collective, institutionalized social activity in America — politics and government, courts, medicine, insurance, finance, real estate, education, agriculture, heavy industry, manufacturing, retail commerce, transportation, housing, law enforcement and the military, sports, religion, etc. All of them are unraveling.

This isn't merely a "coming apart at the seams." No, it's worse than that. Some of these institutions, most notably government, have been systematically dismantled, crippling them. Others are disintegrating, much like that favorite old shirt you love that has been washed too many times and worn for so many years that the material itself is threadbare. Any movement while you wear it is likely to cause tearing. Rips and holes appear seemingly out of nowhere. It's as if the shirt is dissolving right before your eyes. You may try sewing the rips or patching the holes, but gradually you come to the sad realization that your beloved garment is beyond repair and imminently headed for the trash bin.

This is happening across the board, throughout the major institutions of America. Whether hated (like government) or praised (like the military), many have outlived their shelf life, grown old and incompetent (in a kind of institutional Alzheimer's), or succumbed to corruption and rampant self-interest (meaning that they no longer serve their original social mission, but instead focus almost exclusively on their own survival, not that they ever admit this).

In parallel with this organizational decay, the social contract within the population is fracturing. You won't see that at the grocery store, where some semblance of general politeness still holds sway, but it's happening beneath the surface. Emboldened by the echo chambers of social media, our loathing for those with whom we disagree is barely concealed. We tend to lump people we don't know as individuals into polarized, stereotypical group categories — urban/rural, coastal/heartland, white/minority, left/right, liberal/conservative.

Although the poetic quote "the center cannot hold" is often invoked (I did so myself in a recent commentary), I don't think the actual distribution of the bell curve has changed much. The bulk of Americans are still clustered in the bulging middle. What's different is the overwhelming presence of media on screens — TVs, PCs, and smart phones. The constant drumming of the 24/7 news cycle and

the onslaught of online media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) dramatically highlight the outer wings of the curve. Opinions are now as ubiquitous as advertising, and equally loud. Not that I believe those in the center to be sane and those on the wings to be crazy. No, there are sane Americans and crazy Americans at every point along the curve.

The curve has shifted, however. Despite apparent progressive gains, such as acceptance of gay marriage, this country has moved steadily toward ever-stranger forms of "conservatism" over the past 50 years — culturally, politically, and economically — and I regard that as crazy. The tenuous balance between left and right that stabilized America during the mid-20th century is gone. After Vietnam, the left died (Watergate was its last hurrah), and the right rose up with a vengeance. As worldview and policy, neoliberalism has won, pushing the entire bell curve substantially to the right.

What is neoliberalism? Basically, it's a belief system that has always been with us as the granite bedrock of civilization, but which sprouted anew as a rising social movement in the aftermath of the social turbulence of the 1960s, re-rooted with Reagan in America and Thatcher in Britain, then grew like wildfire, fueled by Talk Radio, Christian fundamentalism, right-wing think tanks, and the rise of the Tea Party. Essentially, neoliberalism lobbies for capitalism as a vehicle for Social Darwinism. It holds that private ownership is superior to the public commons, that "the market" is the best mechanism to serve the greater good; that "trickle down" from the top is the ideal and most natural distribution of wealth; and that economics, meaning financial and commercial activity, is more important than people. At their most extreme and virulent, neoliberals believe that money is the only value that really matters.

An accompanying and enabling element of that change is that Americans, especially those in the center, remain more misinformed than the citizenry of many other countries, in part because they've been subjected to the most successful, sustained, and sophisticated campaign of propaganda and mass manipulation humanity has ever seen. World War II documentaries have long posed the question: *How could the Nazis have convinced the German people to embrace the insanity of Nazi cosmology?* Now a similar question can be asked about Americans. *How could neoliberals have convinced so many in our country to embrace right wing insanity?* Turns out that it's not that hard to do.

On its surface, the neoliberal campaign has been crudely unsubtle, delivered primarily through advertising and consumerism, but it succeeded for many reasons, among them its appeal to the most vulnerable and unconscious levels of human desire, our preference for comforting fantasies over harsher realities, and very perverse expressions of the Us-versus-Them dynamics so basic to our neural programming.

Despite the American penchant for conspiracy theorizing, I don't regard the success of neoliberal propaganda as conspiratorial. It's too far-reaching for that. This bizarre fantasy wasn't foisted on us by some cabal of privileged elites meeting in secret conclaves, although such gatherings have always existed, continue to exist, and carry significant impact through their various schemes. Overall, though, this is much bigger than a conspiracy. It's effectively a "collective agreement" entered into because so many of us — at one level or another, almost all of us — are donkey-like in hungering for the carrots dangled in our faces, even many of those who never get to eat the carrots.

Individually, many of us resisted certain facets of the mass seduction. We accepted one or two levels of the fantasy while rejecting many other levels. And thus we felt justified that we were affirming reality rather than succumbing to delusion. But accepting any part of the neoliberal fantasy is a compromise that amounts to a deal with the devil. When even partial acceptance by individuals is multiplied by hundreds of millions of people, we end up with general, overall approval of the entire package. Partial agreement in particular morphs into collective confirmation in general. In this way, we're all complicit, and now we're stuck with the damning results.

Let me offer one example among the thousands that could be chosen: *food consumption of meat*. Human beings are omnivores. We eat most everything and will try to eat damn near anything. But there is no question that most humans love meat — flesh from hooved animals (beef, pork, and sheep), poultry (chicken and turkey), and seafood (fish, crab, lobster). Those are the major categories, but humans eat virtually every animal. We are aggressive carnivores.

Historically, however, meat was a delicacy. Grains and vegetables were our staple diet as bread, soups, and stews. Consider your grandparents or great-grandparents in America. Consumption of meat was limited, typically a special occasion rather than daily fare for all but the most wealthy and privileged among us. And yet, over my lifetime of 70 years, meat consumption has expanded to astonishing proportions. Now most Americans eat meat every day and often as the focus of every meal — breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Eating so much meat, especially in the ways we do it now, is clearly bad for us, bad for the animals, and bad for the planet. I need not detail all the many reasons why. But eating animals is also a baseline desire for most humans that is difficult to resist if offered. And that's exactly what Industrial AgriBusiness did in this country. Except for vegetarians, vegans, and other diehard devotees, we just couldn't say no. Big Ag ramped up meat production and maintained profits by cutting costs and keeping retail prices low.

In Portland, Oregon, back in 1900, fish were plentiful and inexpensive. Salmon was workingmen's food. Chicken was sparse and expensive, effectively for rich people only. Now the situation is reversed. Fish is expensive while chicken is

cheap. Why? Over the past century, we've overfished the seas and rivers to the point of endangering the life of the oceans. Meanwhile, we no longer "raise" chickens in barnyards. We "produce" them by the billions in massive facilities, usually rural or in small towns, and often under conditions that are terrible for the animals and not much better for the workers. Yes, Americans can buy "free-range, cage-free, and organic" chickens, but only a minority of people do.

Is Industrial Agri-Business to blame for this? Sure they are, but so are we. We are all complicit. Capitalists, and neoliberal predatory capitalists in particular, plead innocence. All they are doing, they say, is serving our collective desires for "the good life." The public demands, and capitalism complies. But this is only partially true. What most capitalists fail to admit is that they not only serve existing desires, they also foster new desires whenever and wherever they can.

But then along comes the CoronaVirus. Almost overnight, we learn that the most dangerous places in America for encouraging spread of the pandemic are meat-packing plants (along with nursing homes and prisons, which I will forego writing about here). Who knew? Well, we all could have known (and perhaps should have known) that meat processing was hellish, but we didn't want to. Now we see that our collective addiction to meat is potentially lethal.

As I've written often, I accept the importance of economics. Commerce is the lifeblood of human community and the central linchpin of civilization. What's being revealed now, however, is the inherent and inevitable connection between economics as we've structured it and unnecessary mass suffering.

Capitalism, it can be argued, may work pretty well at the local level of villages. The fact that it doesn't care about people is kept in check by social relationships and community pressures. Expanded to the gargantuan size of the modern American and global economies, however, capitalism becomes monstrous and insane. It is also unsustainable for many reasons, among them its increasing fragility. If interrupted, the interconnected dependencies of on-demand supply chains and urgent payments can wreak havoc. And all it took to derail the whole structure was a little bit of semi-living protein.

I'm not at all sure that humans possess sufficient intelligence or wisdom to "manage" our economic activity, so I'm not lobbying to replace capitalism with socialism. Regardless of what we call our economic system, I remain largely unconvinced that anything we might attempt would result in enough sanity, balance, and grace to save civilization.

Humans were always more than a little crazy. But what we've done over the past 500 years of so-called civilization has brought humanity to the brink of disaster, which has now begun to overtake us as everything unravels. But perhaps I'm wrong.