

# It's All Too Much

by Bill Herbst

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Perhaps it's the fact that I'm 71, with damaged health and steadily increasing decrepitude. Perhaps it's because four years of that idiot showman Trump on every screen 24/7 has exhausted damn near everyone, including me. Perhaps it's because I see increasing evidence that any reform of Death Culture in America is hopeless, and that our only recourse is to watch as slow collapse unfolds. For whatever reasons, it's all become too much for me.

When I make my daily pilgrimage to CounterPunch.org to read that day's list of muckraking articles on the state of the world, it doesn't matter much which article I open and begin to read. After about one or two paragraphs, my brain fogs over. I can't concentrate on whatever story is being told.

Having long ago given up on PBS and CNN, and never having watched FOX, I can no longer bear to turn on MSNBC. Rachel Maddow's years-long obsession with RussiaGate has permanently obliterated her credibility for me. All the well-paid hosts and "expert" panels seem to me little more than shills for the existing and predominant world-view. The corporate narratives of the mainstream media, subtle though they sometimes are, have become screamingly obvious and odious to me. Now I learn that a whole list of trustworthy, left-leaning alternative journalism channels on YouTube are being, in effect, shut down — not officially kicked off YouTube or forbidden to operate, but algorithmically eviscerated, so that any of these channels that challenge the political orthodoxy and may have as many as 100,000 subscribers now draws only 20 people for their Live Feeds. Why? Because the algorithms don't notify subscribers. YouTube is intentionally strangling dissent from the mainstream corporate narratives.

I no longer care about all the behind-the-scenes reasons that AOC and the Squad are renegeing on their promises to tell truth to power and fight for us. I don't give a damn what the reasons are that they caved and didn't use their considerable leverage to force a vote on Medicare for All or insist on keeping the \$15-an-hour Minimum Wage hike in Biden's \$1.9 trillion rescue bill. Whether it's 1) the seductions of careerism, 2) the newfound celebrity of the Squad, 3) the harsh realities of hardball politics in the House and Senate, 4) the fact that what these so-called "Progressives" promised us they'd do turns out to be much more difficult than they thought, or 5) any other bullshit excuse they give — doesn't matter to me one whit. They caved — not at the last moment, but right out of the gate. They gave in to Death Culture. End of story, goddammit.

Similarly — although a little less soul-crushingly disappointing, since it was so predictable — I laugh at the mainstream media's contention that Biden is more "progressive" than Obama was. For the past 40 years, Biden has consistently and always been among the worst faux-Democrat shills for Big Money Corporate America. He was a conservative, institutionalist Republican-Lite Senator (who was called "Mr. Credit Card" for his unflagging support of the Delaware credit card banks). Biden supported Clarence Thomas' confirmation to the Supreme Court by silencing Anita Hill. But Bill, what about the racial and gender diversity of Biden's cabinet and other high-level appointments? Don't kid me. All those appointees believe in "the system" and the fantasy of incremental change.

Remember the Georgia Senate runoff on January 5th, just one day before the QAnon-Trumpist Cult's assault on the Capitol? Biden had promised that if Georgians turned out in sufficient numbers to elect the two Democratic Senate candidates — which they did — then all those voters and millions of other Americans would get \$2,000 checks "immediately." Well, that two grand turned out to be only \$1,400. And even that paltry amount of so-called "relief for the people" is only a one-time deal, not anything remotely like the \$2,000 per month checks that Australians have been receiving from their government or the up-to-\$7,000 monthly checks from the French government for their people.

Oh no. While the billionaire class has profited handsomely from the pandemic, ordinary Americans (meaning breadwinners who have lost their jobs, with little to no savings, quite possibly no health care insurance, and anxiety about putting food on the table or losing their homes) get a mere \$1,400 as a one-time shot in the arm — barely enough to pay a single month's rent or mortgage. Beyond that insult, recipients of government checks include an even larger percentage who are *not* needy and are more well off financially. In other words, we must never give *anything* to poorer Americans without giving more to the wealthy.

Now we're drone-bombing in Syria, still caging children at the border, hearing Republicans bitch about Dr. Seuss, and seeing voter repression bills passing in most state legislatures. I swear, after a lifetime of this nonsense, it's getting to be too much for me. All of it. Too damned much.

Do I regard this reaction as a personal failure? Yes. If I were a little healthier, physically and emotionally stronger, and had even a shred of faith left about the continuing but questionable project of civilization, perhaps I could hang in there better. But I'm not healthy enough or strong enough or faithful enough to climb over my bone-marrow weariness about the corruption of damn near everything.

Oh yes, I continue to do my session work with clients, and that's still meaningful — in some ways, better than ever. And I write. A lot. Every day. Plus, I cook and clean and take care of all the necessary tasks of daily living (thankfully, I'm not yet a total invalid...). But beyond that, keeping up with the daily and unfolding melodrama of our collective madness is becoming more than I can bear.

It's not that I'm cynical — at least I don't think so. I feel that the vast majority of humans are well-meaning, good-intentioned, and do the best they know how

much of the time. But we are so easily led astray, so vulnerable to being conned — both by others and by ourselves — that all of us have some beliefs that are just dead wrong, and some of us are so far down the rabbit hole of having been seduced into buying nonsense that we're essentially playing for the other side without even knowing it. Such people have become "useful idiots" — not for the Russians, whose Cold War antics provided that term — but for all the American elites who benefit from Death Culture and think it's just hunky-dory. The circus term "rubes" tends to conjure up images of uneducated hicks from the sticks, but it applies just as often to university professors. America is chock full of rubes from every cultural stripe and political persuasion. And the scariest possibility is that you and I might just be, in our own ways, rubes as well.

I'm not personally conflicted about what I believe, but I'm more than a little worried about what (and who) I believe *in*. In the abstract, the truth is fairly straightforward. In the messiness and uber-complexity of real life, however, where fantasies, dreams, illusions, and outright lies all dress up to look real, authoritative truth becomes as slippery as a greased pig. Having seen that demonstrated time and again over my lifetime has left me frustrated, disturbed, and more than a little worried about our future.

The way things are is probably still OK from the perspective of a singular, individual life-journey, where all that's riding on our lives is doing the work of gradual maturity. [*I prefer the simplicity of the word "maturity" over loftier, more idealistic words such as "enlightenment" or "consciousness" — maturity doesn't carry all the spiritual baggage of those other words.*] Throughout most of human history, the challenge was focused mainly on any given individual's striving to understand reality well enough to begin filtering out or letting go of some of the illusions, so that maturity was achieved one person at a time.

Learning about the subtle interactions between love and power and gaining the ability to combine those two human agencies more gracefully may have always been exquisitely rare, but, at any given time, some human on the planet was, if not completely achieving it, at least moving incrementally closer to deeper understanding and maturity. Back then, our cumulative, collective craziness had only minor impact on the world around us. The chaos and suffering that humans created — whether inadvertent or intentional, and however tragic — was limited in size and scope. Nature sucked up our mistakes, and Life moved on without missing a beat. Meanwhile, the maturation of one person at a time continued.

The past 200 years have changed that. Our power to mess with environments (both physical and psychological) has grown staggeringly huge, so the human tendencies to misunderstand reality by our being compulsively driven but short-sighted, selfish, and deluded are magnified billion-fold in their effects upon ourselves and the world. Now our collective impact is planetary in scope, and the suffering we create is virtually unlimited.

And yet, maturity still apparently progresses at a snail's pace, only one person at a time. Our social institutions — which measure our sanity in groups — remain at shockingly low levels. In short, our overall maturity has not advanced much,

and maybe not at all. The challenge that comes with being human has changed, but our collective ability to rise to that challenge hasn't grown.

Various people have stated their presumption that (to cite the famous quote by Martin Luther King) "*The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.*" Whether true or not, that perspective was offered as a reminder to those who work to improve society and civilization not to fall into despair over any apparent lack of progress, but to maintain both diligence and patience in fighting the good fight. That quote was a sophisticated rendering of the comic slogan slapped on office cubicle walls: "*The hurrier I go, the behinder I get.*" The problem, of course, is that now we actually *are* running out of time.

If our maturity as a species does not improve significantly and pretty darned quickly, the whole experiment of Life on Planet Earth will be in danger. Our immaturity may even bring about our own extinction, although no one can make that prediction with certainty. For the time being at least, homo sapiens is still kicking. But we're not doing well, and our future doesn't look promising.

Everything we've tried so far to pick the locked box of collective maturity has failed to crack the code. All our efforts to advance in that direction have been quickly corrupted and co-opted to serve our immaturity. I'm not suggesting that no progress has been made — obviously it has for some people — but, with every small step forward collectively, we seem to then take two larger steps back. And the cumulative butcher's bill is coming due.

I think back to 1983 — a full year before the first Mac debuted — when Steve Jobs convinced John Sculley, then-CEO of Pepsi, to become the Chief Executive Officer at Apple by asking him this question: "*Do you want to sell sugar water for the rest of your life, or do you want to come with me to change the world?*" How did that work out? Sculley went with Jobs, and now we have the Internet, smart phones, and social media. Given that, has the world changed for the better? Has humanity really matured collectively because of all that spiffy new technology? I'd argue that the answer is no in both cases. The fantasy of techno-salvation continues to be widely held, but I no longer believe in it. The band keeps playing new tunes while we rearrange the deck chairs, but we're still just passengers on the sinking Titanic. And there aren't nearly enough lifeboats.

Most Big Ideas that start out with the aim of helping humanity and the world end up not only *not* improving our situation, but all too often by making things worse. Why? Because the outer work of progress must be accompanied by the inner work of maturity. While humans are good at the former, we suck at the latter. Sadly, we can't afford that imbalance much longer. Each successive year where pervasive immaturity dominates the collective is another nail in our coffin.

At this point, even our individual journeys toward maturity are being disrupted. The old ones among us (which includes me) are faltering as we come to the end of our time. I hope the young ones turn out to be stronger than we were. They'll need to be.