

Fear of Replacement

by Bill Herbst

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The idea that something is very wrong with America creates strange bedfellows. As a harsh critic of this country, I find myself aligned (perversely) with millions of people I don't like — Republicans and the entire far right wing of the political spectrum, which includes a sizable percentage of the American public. We all hold the opinion that something is rotten in this country. The difference — and it's a critical distinction — lies in what we think is wrong.

I'm opposed to Death Culture, which is my catch-all heading for a whole phalanx of different but interconnected policies and practices (some formal, but many just normative) that are deeply embedded in American society and the national consciousness. My use of the word "consciousness" here makes me cringe a little. Perhaps I could substitute the term "national unconsciousness," but a more accurate replacement might be "national lack of empathy, compassion, and inclusion."

My list of complaints is long. Here are the top three:

1. A natural environment so overwhelmed and poisoned by humans that the near-inevitability of catastrophic climate change now stares us in the face. In the trifecta of soil, air, and water, the web of life on earth can no longer survive, much less prosper, and it's because of us. Whales and dolphins didn't do this. The Cosmos didn't do it. Humans did.
2. Egregious inequality in wealth, privilege, and opportunity — not just the inevitable inequality that accompanies all human affairs, but an extreme inequality that has been engineered into the system through late-stage, predatory capitalism and rampant greed. This includes racism and class warfare.
3. The vast military-industrial-commercial-governmental complex and its waging of endless wars around the world, along with an increasingly obsessive and authoritarian security state within the U.S. This includes an ever-expanding stockpile of new and horrific weapons — nuclear, biological, and God knows what else.

And these three are only the top entries on my long list.

I'm not sure that we'd find any of those concerns on the lists of people on the right. What complaints would we find? Many, I imagine, but they tend to boil down to a single issue: *Replacement of whites by people who were historically in the minority*. Such people are almost invariably non-white and non-Christian. That's the umbrella that encompasses just about all their gripes.

A recently completed analytical study of the demographics of Americans who participated in the assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6th of this year is illuminating. The analysis was based on FBI info about the backgrounds of the 400 people already indicted, as well as thousands of others who may not have entered the Capitol but who showed up that day and supported the assault.

Most of the rioters were white and male, as was to be expected. Primarily, though, they weren't militia members or unemployed factory workers. Very few such people participated. By and large, the insurrectionists were Americans who are well-heeled economically — middle-class and above, with substantial representation from the professional classes: lawyers, business owners and mid-level execs, and even some government officials.

In the analysis, the number one reason they all showed up and acted as they did, common to almost all the rioters, was *fear of replacement*.

Consider what's happening in Republican-controlled state capitols around the country. After a century of often bloody struggle and painfully slow progress to secure the rights of non-white minorities and even the white lower economic classes, those hard-earned victories for some semblance of human dignity have come undone in the first two decades of this century. The right wing (think Tea Party) arose from and was radicalized by the realization that white control of America was steadily eroding. So, step by step, Republicans have shucked their former principles in favor of stopping what they see as a creeping but steadily progressing lava flow from a demographic volcano that will undercut and eventually destroy the white race's historically dominant position.

Rather than trying to increase their base, Republicans seek instead to stem the rising tide against them by disenfranchising or disempowering the people they fear will replace them: Blacks and Latinos primarily, but basically anyone who isn't a member of their white, Protestant country club. In 2013, the Supreme Court, led by ultra-conservative Chief Justice John Roberts, gutted the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Along with the infamous Citizens United decision, which allowed Dark Money to take over politics, that act of right-wing judicial activism opened the floodgates to a new and shocking level of Republican hijinks aimed at killing democracy and securing white power through voter suppression.

The thing is, Republicans' fear of replacement is real, not made up. They're right about it. So, they're doing everything they can to prevent it. Republicans are unabashed in their intentions and not shameful in the least about their efforts to "legally" hold onto power. No, they fervently believe in what they're doing and feel "patriotic" about it. Sure, they lie like hell about why they're doing it, but the

lying is so transparent and obvious that anyone who believes their BS deserves to get fleeced. If Republicans succeed, Death Culture wins.

Centrist Democrats won't stop them. Is America better off because Trump is no longer in the White House? Is our long national nightmare finally over? Not by a long shot. For all his apparently sincere but slightly unctuous public displays of empathy, Joe Biden is still a dyed-in-the-wool corporate Democrat who supports the status quo. All the talk about Biden's evolving into a more progressive figure is finally just pissing into the wind. As an effective antidote to Death Culture, the Democratic Party is little more than a Band-Aid, a mere placebo.

The funny-car quarter-mile nitro-fueled dragster that is America is headed hell-bent-for-leather right over a cliff. Remember the 1955 movie, *Rebel Without a Cause*, that made James Dean a star? Dean's fame was short-lived and ended in tragedy later that same year when his Porsche was totaled in a high-speed crash. Well, America is a bit like James Dean. Sure, we may survive the "chicken race" that was scripted into that movie as a plot device, but our suffering Dean's deadly fate in real life is all too possible.

For America to really change for the better, we need a revolution. I'd prefer it to be a peaceful transformation of collective consciousness — a process of our maturing toward sanity rather than a knock-down-drag-out brawl for raw power — but I'm dubious about the chances of that happening. It would take a miracle, and, unlike devout Christians, I'm not much of a believer in miracles. Instead, I put my faith into the slower, less magical discipline of inner work on oneself. In reality, though, I don't see the effort toward mindfulness as having a very significant role in American life.

From my perspective, most of us (and I include myself here) are still enthralled to one degree or another by the seductions of Death Culture. I would dearly love to be wrong about that, but it appears that loving ideals don't matter much in our collective evolution — the amygdala's realm of aversion, revulsion, and fear still continues to call most of the shots. *Us versus Them* remains the dominant theme in civilization that underpins the bulk of our social interactions.

What's different about all previous epochs in humanity's history and our collective situation now is that we no longer have the luxury of infinite time. The jig is up, and the repercussions of our folly are fast approaching a climax. That climax doesn't have to be a single event, like the meteor impact that wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago and opened the door to the rise of mammals. It could be a slower process, an accumulation of small, incremental crises over time that, taken together, might be sufficient to wreck civilization.

Is there any chance at all that humanity might arise, phoenix-like, from its own ashes? Could we shed our addictions to illusion and self-deception and develop enough sanity and maturity to survive? Might we become humble enough to neutralize our arrogant narcissism? Can this occur in time to prevent collapse?

The answers to all those questions are way above my pay grade.