

Backlash

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I've written often about corruption, mainly as it occurs in two separate but related dimensions. One level of corruption is individuals who are Monsters. That's pretty self-explanatory. The other level is institutional decay. This is the tendency of organizations that are originally chartered to serve the public good devolving into self-serving clubs of privileged elites. That occurs through the dynamic of individuals for whom belonging and acceptance are more important than challenging the group by doing the right thing. Such people are not inherently Monsters, but they end up becoming Monstrous to maintain their social standing and livelihoods. They sell out rather than stand up. Going along with the crowd is safer than risking censure and rejection.

Corruption is, of course, inevitable among humans, and it's a primary reason why civilization is so screwed up. But it's not the only reason.

Recently, I've written also about the sad truism that so much of what humanity creates that is initially good (or at least well-intentioned), goes sour (not by itself, but because of human abuse) and ends up becoming yet another source of unnatural cruelty and suffering. This applies to damn near everything. Pick any element within modern civilization — products, services, structures, ideas, whatever — and it will have been perverted into something that results in more harm than good. Any joy and celebration will mask deeper meaninglessness and suffering.

In this post, I want to delve a little deeper into how that change occurs. Stated simply, the reason is *backlash*. Every good thing ever created to serve the common good provokes a backlash among those for whom the common good is antithetical. That includes all of those who believe in Social Darwinism ("survival of the fittest") — an "order of nature" they regard as correct and proper. For them, the strong are deserving and the weak are not. They see selfishness as strength and compassion as weakness. Fair play, generosity of spirit, and even modest self-sacrifice are abhorrent.

Of course, the people at whom I'm taking aim here would vehemently disagree. They would protest that they're perfectly willing to sacrifice through hard work, but not by surrendering what they've earned that should rightfully be theirs. They'd also insist that they're generous to a fault when it is called for, but not when it involves free lunch for the undeserving. While there may be a smattering of truth to their defensive arguments, when we peel back the surface and look

underneath, the arguments don't hold up. What wafts up from underneath is the stench of rot — arrogance, hubris, and false superiority.

Backlash starts as an individual reaction, but then gains traction more powerfully as a social phenomenon. Although anyone — regardless of economics, class, education, background, or social stature — may engage in backlash (i.e., seeing the world as a dog-eat-dog struggle where certain people are affirmed and rewarded as worthwhile winners while others are rejected and reviled as worthless losers), it's primarily those who are rich, well-to-do, and elite who wreak the most havoc in America. They see in developments occurring in our country threats to their positions of privilege. They then congregate in their clubs and organizations to share their concerns about possible loss with other wealthy people. What do they fear losing? Power and money (or money and power — the order is interchangeable, since money and power have a chicken-egg relationship), but also love and happiness.

Their concerns are almost always couched in terms of social stability, security, and maintenance of the status quo, with an emphasis on social institutions (such as marriage and family), but those are abstractions that don't carry much water. Their more practical concerns are shutting down what the wealthy elites see as disconcerting movements within the rabble of the masses.

These people believe in a human society that most closely resembles an ant colony or beehive, where roles and positions are stratified into permanent classes ordained by nature, and maintained with complete conformity. They believe in a top-down hierarchy with them at the top. They cling also to a belief in their innate superiority — if not always by birth, then by presumed achievement (which they typically see as the result of their own efforts, rather than luck, help, or the serendipity of being in the right place at the right time). They tend to see the larger public as undeserving, mere sheep or slaves.

Starting in the 1960s, but deepening into the 1970s, when the elites got together in their board rooms and country clubs and corporate conclaves, they created strategies and tactics for stopping what they saw as threats to society. They did this through an impressive arsenal of techniques, all of which involved spending large sums of money (although that expense was only a small sliver of their wealth). Two strategies predominated: The first was to influence government policy through lobbying. In modern America, megacorporations effectively own the government at every level — local, state, and federal. Hell, their lobbyists even write the laws, which are often passed by legislatures that have been effectively bought and paid for, and without the legislators even reading the bills.

The other primary strategy was education, or rather miseducation. The rich needed to get the great unwashed masses on their side to be able to undo the common good, which they feared would dilute the gene pool, and they achieved this through a massive investment into propaganda — the creation of false but convincing arguments cooked up by right wing "Think Tanks" (such as the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation) and then flooded into the media. That was accompanied by the explosion of right-wing call-in shows on what came

to be known as Talk Radio. The most notable of the early hosts was Rush Limbaugh, but a whole slew of these hucksters came on the scene in the 1980s and 1990s, and they've been followed in the initial two decades of the 21st century by an entirely new generation and even larger arsenal of right-wing clowns on television, the internet, and social media.

Basically, the arguments were designed to appeal to public discontent and to distract Americans away from the actual ongoing transfer of wealth upwards by fooling regular people into believing that they, too, could and should one day become the rich leaders, and that whatever promoted the common good was fraudulently stealing money from those who were deserving, to give it to those who weren't.

The combination of these arguments through a mountain of sophistry has been incredibly effective. Large swaths of the American public have been essentially hypnotized, entranced by two kinds of bullshit — bogus philosophies and consumer toys. The bogus philosophy is the entire neoliberal project put forth so aggressively over the past 50 years as the next wave of a longer-standing belief — that of American Exceptionalism. Americans have always been strongly inclined to embrace the imaginary status of being God's Chosen People, so the neoliberals who cheerlead with chants of we're-number-one-and-oh-so-special have been preaching to that choir.

That last metaphor is telling, since neoliberalism is actually more a religion than a philosophy. It's a set of unfounded assumptions, none of which are supported by evidence, but no matter. Americans are all too easily convinced that the thieves they should fear (and hate) are the lazy, good-for-nothing oafs who don't and won't work for a living rather than the rich who want to own and control absolutely everything. In the neoliberal canon, the lazy, good-for-nothing oafs translates as the poor, racial minorities, or immigrants, even though people in those categories tend to be much more hard-working than most Americans. But then, fear of those on the bottom rungs of the social and economic ladder has a long history in America. The Monsters and their Minions have done everything they can to stoke that seemingly ancient and primal fear. As the equivalent of picking only the lowest-hanging, most easily-reached fruit, their efforts have been stunningly successful.

Another brief retelling of history is in order here, this time with a slightly different slant. Between the 1930s and the 1970s, an internal fight was waged here in America for the soul of our society. The Great Depression had revealed the dangers of the existing economic system in our country, and longstanding movements for change gained significant traction during the decades that followed. The confidence of the wealthy was very badly shaken by the Great Depression, and they made numerous concessions, all of which they regarded as unpleasant but necessary sacrifices. They did this grudgingly, however, and only to keep the system of commerce and ownership from complete collapse.

After the end of World War II and the consolidation of U.S. power during the late 1940s and 1950s, however, things were different. The wealthy had recovered.

They were once again more secure about their power and their divine right to rule. They decided to confront the progressive tide, with two goals: First, to stop its momentum, then second, to undo all the concessions to the Left that had been made in the 1930s and 1940s.

That decision escalated into an ideological war whose battlegrounds were in economics and social policy. By the waning stages of that war in the early 1970s, the result was an awkward and uncomfortable stalemate. America had made some significant progressive gains, but the Monsters still remained a powerful force. At that point — on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War protests, with all the civil unrest of that turbulent 1960s decade — the serious backlash germinated. Basically, the Monsters got together and said, "*No more of this shit.*" The war for America's soul took a drastic turn. Sadly for the Left, that renewed war was over shortly after it began. The conquest of America in the 1980s by the Right was a bit like Hitler's Blitzkrieg through Europe in 1940, but without the subsequent mistake of Barbarossa.

The old right-wing ideology was rebranded as Neoliberalism — supply-side economics, trickle-down theory, and "free market" ideology — and its crusading banner was carried by a pair of knights of the realm: Ronald Reagan here in America and Margaret Thatcher in Britain. The Monsters used their immense wealth to mount a campaign unlike anything seen before in America. Given how easily fooled the American public is, the Monsters prevailed in skirmish after skirmish, then battle after battle, and before the 1980s were finished, the war ended. The Monsters had won. Dismantling of the former progressive gains was already underway in earnest. The social welfare net was ended, along with the escalation of harsh imprisonment for undesirables, and finally the legal constraints on the risky gambles of the financial industry put in place after the Great Depression were removed.

Corporations became the vengeful, dictatorial sword of the Monsters, the vehicle through which they could own and control everything. From the Gilded Age of the Robber Barons in the 1870s, big corporations had always wielded outsized influence in America (i.e., "*What's good for General Motors is good for the USA... ?*"). By the time Bill Clinton was elected President in 1990, however, (as the first of the Democrats who were actually Republicans, a trend that was continued by Barack Obama and Joe Biden), megacorporations had effectively taken over completely. They owned the government and politicians. They made the laws. And, along with the Monsters who owned and ran the corporations, they wanted everything their own way, and as much of the country's wealth as they could get.

Thirty years later, the Monsters and corporations have gotten what they wanted. America is now a full-blown banana republic, the most corrupt nation on earth, with extreme and worsening wealth inequality that is downright astounding. Any talk about democracy and freedom has always been suspect in America — more bogus than sincere — but now all such discussion is absolutely ludicrous.