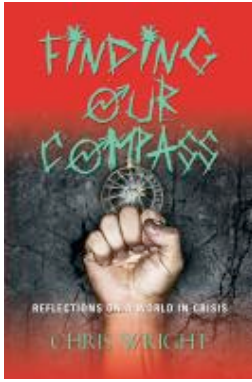


FINDING OUR COMPASS



REFLECTIONS ON A WORLD IN CRISIS

CHRIS WRIGHT



In a series of free-wheeling reflections and summaries of scholarship, this book reinterprets history and culture along anarchist lines. From a Marxian point of view, it illuminates capitalism, U.S. history, popular culture, gender relations, and human psychology, even the nature of the fascinating concepts "genius" and "greatness." Its agenda is that of the 17th-century Levellers: deflate the pomposities of elite authority, and bring the world down to the level of democratic reason.

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REFLECTIONS ON A WORLD IN CRISIS

Chris Wright

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ISBN: 978-1-63490-043-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2014

First Edition

Chapter One

Social Structures and the Individual

Valedictory.— Our civilization is approaching the end. We're peering over the precipice, and chaos boils below. The time has come to sum it all up, to take account of where we are and what we've done, and to pass judgment. We, the generations now living, have been lucky or unlucky enough to be present as history nears its climax; we have an abundance of human experience to survey and draw conclusions from, conclusions to pass on to posterity as it surveys the even more breathtaking ruins we'll leave. We want to go out with some dignity, with positive lessons to impart to our descendants so that they know not all of us were idiots. We've lived long enough to learn life's truths; we've suffered enough to be wise. Let's cast our glance from the future to the past and grasp the threads of human thought while there is still some link between what was and what is, some memory of what is rapidly fading. Perhaps some future explorer will discover our buried treasure, our Dead Sea Scrolls, and read about lost worlds, and be carried away by tales of folly and adventure. In the meantime, a few glimmers of honesty and perspective may light up our world and reveal it to itself...

*

Advice for writers.— In general, it's a good idea for writers to imagine how their work would be seen by posterity. Would their descendants view it as parochial, time-bound, and faddish, or would they still find intrinsic and timeless merit in it? Would it hold up in a different cultural context? If not, the writer should rethink his work so as to give it more universal relevance, thereby heightening its artistic and intellectual value. It's true that one cannot, even in imagination, entirely rise above one's culture and view its artifacts

from the outside; nevertheless, insofar as we're *humans* and not mere cultural byproducts, the exercise is partly within the bounds of possibility. Indeed, people are constantly judging their societies and particular social practices from a human, semi-"objective" standpoint; such are moral judgments, properly so-called, grounded in the timeless and universal morality of the Golden Rule, i.e., respect and compassion for others. (This morality seems to be ingrained in the human brain, judging by people's near-universal, albeit frequently compromised and conditional, acceptance of it.) Aesthetic and intellectual judgments, too, are not mere epiphenomena of a particular culture but are natural, though socially influenced, expressions of innate structures in the human cognitive and affective faculties. The writer's, in fact the artist's and philosopher's and scientist's, task ought to be to transcend the limitations of time and place and appeal to the highest standards of the innately human. Ideally his work would be "immortal."

*

Enlightenment.— Said Samuel Johnson, on art: "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just [i.e., true] representations of general nature. Particular manners can be known to few, and therefore few only can judge how nearly they are copied. The irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight a-while, by that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest; but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth." This statement is a sufficient indictment of most postmodernist art, and most things culturally postmodern. It's time we turned away from relativism, solipsism, social atomism, fragmentary perspectives, ironical self-consciousness, instant gratifications, pop art, pop philosophies, and commodified creativity. Honesty and truth are overdue.

*

On the use and abuse of "perspective" for life.— There are delights and dangers in adopting a broad perspective on oneself and one's society. Looking at the "big picture" can either electrify or paralyze one's will. The latter possibility is obvious, given, for example, the big-picturesque horrors of global warming and capitalist global pollution. Oceanic garbage patches the size of continents, slums the size of cities, cities disintegrating into slums, and a planetary future incinerated in the vortex of capitalism are not things that quicken the will to live. Internecine violence running riot from Mexico to the Middle East, from central Africa to Russia, as governments outdo each other in the art of cultivating murderous resentments, does not inspire confidence in one's ability to make meaningful change. Despair on a cosmic scale, encompassing life from low species already extinguished to high species threatened with extinction, suffocates "optimism of the will," "pessimism of the intellect" alone remaining.

The added burden of such modern afflictions has done nothing to ease the ancient burdens philosophers and poets have bewailed since the Upanishads. Earth is a pale blue dot in the infinite expanse of desolate space. What matter our little earthly tribulations or triumphs? Someday we'll all be gone, Earth itself will be gone, and it will be as though nothing ever was. No art, no music, none of the sound and fury of a Faustian but forgotten history. "All is vanity!" The flower of youth wilts, as poets have lamented for millennia, withering into a decayed old age and finally death. Pleasures are evanescent; time consumes all, like Saturn devouring his children. The transience of everything makes life seem meaningless—as does, in another way, the immensity of Earth (however microscopic it is on the cosmic scale), the prodigious mass of humanity compared to which the individual is too puny to mention. People come and go like flies. —The plaintive cry of Ecclesiastes still resonates two thousand years later.

On the other hand, the “big picture” need not be utterly demoralizing. To contemplate the grandeur of the universe can be a nearly religious experience, Kantian in its sublimity. “Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe,” Kant said, “the more often and the more intensely we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” One feels vanishingly insignificant but gloriously exalted at the same time, uplifted to dazzling infinity as one glories in the ability to *reflect* on this black unbounded cosmos. The relative immensity of Earth, likewise, and one’s being a mere momentary individual among billions, fills with wonder and awe, even love for all fellow creatures stranded inexplicably on this floating island in space. Time itself overawes. Translucent as a pellucid mountain river, the life-engendering flow of time carries us along to experience the beauty of *change*. The broad human perspective illuminates hope and the reality of change.

To glance over the modern world is to know the temptation of despair, but it is to know *possibility* as well. Fatalism is a factually incorrect philosophy. Horrors happen daily, but from a broad perspective one sees also constant kindnesses and life-saving interventions. A billion moments of moral beauty every day; ten billion meaningful connections between this life and that life. Even lost in anguish, even surrounded by modern ugliness, one can see beams of hope piercing the gloom. To know the true urgency of humanity’s situation, however, *should* entail not wretched immobility but galvanized movement, passionate activism. When people join together they *can* make meaningful change.

*

The Goethean possibilities of history.— A major advantage of living at this time, so late in history, is that the past is a kaleidoscope of cultural achievements, or rather a cornucopian buffet whose fruits one can sample—a kiwi here, a mango there—a few papayas—and

then choose which are one's favorite delicacies—which are healthiest, which savory and sweet—and invent one's own diet tailored to one's needs. History can be appropriated by each person as he chooses, selectively used in the service of his self-creation. The individual can be more complete than ever in the past! Only, to bring the magnificent array of possibilities down to earth and so give *all* people the means to sample history's treats requires a reevaluation of society's values and transformation of its structures. It's time we spread the banquet not in the gilded halls of the elite but in the humble homes of the people.

*

Goetterdämmerung.— Albert Camus: “We [moderns] read more than we meditate. We have no philosophies but merely commentaries. This is what Étienne Gilson says, considering that the age of philosophers concerned with philosophy was followed by the age of professors of philosophy concerned with philosophers. Such an attitude shows both modesty and impotence. And a thinker who began his book with these words: ‘Let us take things from the beginning,’ would evoke smiles. It has come to the point where a book of philosophy appearing today without basing itself on any authority, quotation or commentary would not be taken seriously.” The reality that he describes is nothing else than institution-think. Expertly calibrated, self-replicating capitalist-friendly institutions dominate culture, and such institutions cannot get to the heart of the matter or exalt the sort of world-engendering creativity that highly ennoble. What they can do is manufacture minute monographs, reduce to the common denominator, and make ever less relevant to human concerns. I recall what I wrote once in college:

Looked at the Tufts University philosophy department website; I might apply there. Part of its mission statement is “to provide students with the skills necessary for Ph.D. res-

earch, as well as to foster the independence of mind required for genuinely creative philosophical work.” It depressed me to read that, as if a draft of nihilism had wafted by: life felt picayune suddenly, mechanical, scholarly—training people to think!—and denying philosophy even as they preach it! Well-oiled parts of the machine, functioning smoothly, cooperating with contemporary ways of doing things. What philosopher has ever cooperated? Philosophy is rebellion, war with authority in every form; it is a *way of life*, not ‘tidy thinking’ or scholarship or a specialty. Spartacus was a philosopher; Daniel Dennett is not.

The verbose perverseness that passes for philosophy now signifies a perversion of the human spirit, a discursifying of it, a domesticating institutionalizing of it, perversely appropriate to a society that has “repressively desublimated” all that is profound and creative in life. The late-capitalist categorical imperative of culture is to trivialize at all costs and for all profits, to privatize, atomize, marketize, professionalize, impersonalize, and stupidize, all in order to replicate and accumulate, to replicate and accumulate institutions and a New Man, *homo bureaucraticus*. Or, ultimately, *homo economicus*. Certainly philosophy, of all things, cannot flourish in such an environment, nor can anything else that demands to be free and unconstrained by institutional limits. The existentialist cry of the mid-twentieth century—followed by the barbaric yawp of the Sixties’ youth movements, preceded by the anti-capitalist vibrancy of labor movements in their heyday and earlier Romantic culture for the modernity-ambivalent elite and saturnalian revelry for the untamed multitude—has died, or faded from cultural prominence, but its echo cannot die until humankind itself does. The cycle continues, and we’re about to see another of its revolutions...

*

Modernity vs. humanity.— Herbert Gutman's "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815–1919" (1973) reminds us of what a rich world we lost with the standardization and atomization of society. Such diversity and humanness, artisanal craftsmanship and pride, free-wheeling festivals of life outside the factory. Actually, already in the mid-nineteenth century the dehumanization was apparent, according to Mike Walsh in the 1840s: "A 'gloomy, churlish, money-worshipping spirit' had 'swept nearly all the poetry out of the poor man's sphere,' said the editor-politician. 'Ballad-singing, street dancing, tumbling, public games, all are either prohibited or discountenanced, so that Fourth of July and election sports alone remain.'" Local and national power-structures pressing the masses into dull rectangular shapes. The nascent nation-state suppressing local variety, spontaneity being dangerous to centralized power.

*

Homo ludens vs. homo institutorum.— The psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott said it simply—one of those simple but profound truths worth remembering: "It is creative apperception more than anything that makes the individual feel that life is worth living." Creativity is not uniquely human, but humans are uniquely creative. We have a need to create, and to love, and to inquire—to express ourselves and see ourselves reflected in the world. We have the urge to *play*, an urge innate in our biological nature. "Creative impulses are the stuff of playing. And on the basis of playing is built the whole of man's experiential existence." The child plays with his toys and his playmates, exploring his new world in the realm of fantasy, like the poet and the artist. The musician *plays* music, as the athlete plays a sport. In theater, one watches a play. The scientist and the philosopher play with ideas, perhaps in great seriousness but with those elements of fun, creativity, "tension," and voluntary submission to implicit rules that Johan Huizinga invokes in *Homo Ludens* (1938) to

define play. Social life is essentially playful, very clearly so as regards flirting and dating, in which the tension of play takes the form of *sexual* tension. And when things get more intimate the partners engage in sexual *foreplay*—and intercourse itself can be delightfully playful. The ubiquity of games in human societies, from simple hide-and-seek to chess and complex card games, in addition to the thrill of friendly *competition* in indefinitely many forms (athletic, intellectual, artistic, etc.), shows how the agonistic spirit suffuses the human mind. The spirit of play, in short, is the spirit of freedom, “superfluity,” joyful self-expression, and immersive engagement with the world.

At the other end of the spectrum are *modern institutions*. Humans, it turns out, are capable not only of play but also of dull and dead seriousness. We have the capacity to *obey authority*, and to imbibe its individuality-denying, repressively collectivistic norms. We join institutions or are subject to them, to the impersonal rules that dictate how we are to act and think, and without even noticing it we participate in the near-extirpation of our individuality (at least in the institutional context). The self-effacing, amoral, mechanical mentality of the typical bureaucrat is the obvious example, which, as Hannah Arendt observed in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), can lead straight into complicity in monstrous crimes. But more benign manifestations exist. Theodor Adorno already remarked in the 1940s that “even the so-called intellectual professions are being deprived, through their growing resemblance to business, of all joy. Atomization is advancing not only between men, but within each individual, between the spheres of his life.”¹ In leisure time one might still “play” and be creative, though mass-produced culture was sapping even leisurely pursuits of their authentically creative and spontaneous element; but in the context of the “job,” the rote conformism of *seriousness* had crowded out freedom and self-

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: New Left Books, 1978/1951), 85.

expression. Ultimately corporate capitalism itself, with its hideous architecture of concrete hierarchies to control society and amass profit, was and is responsible for such pernicious tendencies—for the bureaucratic collectivism that requires but a nudge to become fascist totalitarianism, and for the detaching of hapless functionaries from the consequences of their actions so that professionals and bureaucrats and intellectuals can all become little Eichmanns engineering distant horrors, and for the kitschifying of culture that brings totalitarianism into the sphere of play, and for the routinizing and vulgarizing of creativity that empties life of its meaning. The two principles are at opposite poles: *creative play*, and *capitalist-institutional atomization*.

It is the tragedy of modern man that “two souls, alas, dwell within my breast.” We seek self-affirming self-expression—authentic engagement with others—even as we let ourselves be regimented by authority. The path to reclaim play, i.e., our very humanity, is the path to reclaim democracy, human dignity, and social justice: tear down the walls that divide us from ourselves and others. Bring back the “ballad-singing, street dancing, tumbling, [and] public games,” and scandalize the bosses with your flouting of their rules. Resurrect the *public*.

*

On the Holocaust.— Even seventy years later, having learned nothing, Western intellectuals still love to proclaim with the ponderous air of authority that the Holocaust was “thoroughly at odds with the great traditions of Western civilization,” as Richard Rubenstein paraphrases in his book *The Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future* (1975). It was contrary to all our glorious Western values of freedom, truth, beauty, rationality, and other pretty words that intellectuals pretend to admire. Let’s leave aside the fact that “the West” has never had a monopoly on such values: they’re not *Western* values but *human* values, which people from prehistory

onwards have implicitly subscribed to and acted on. More pertinent is the fact that for centuries the West has been more committed to quite different values, such as insatiable greed, plunder and enslavement of foreign peoples, genocide of native populations, vicious exploitation of wage-laborers, murderous hatred of the “Other,” ever-increasing policing of society (in both “soft” and “hard” forms), and atomizing bureaucratic collectivism that dehumanizes everything it touches. None of this has been because Westerners are uniquely evil or have a different human nature from other peoples; it has been because a new kind of society arose, structured around the institutional imperative to accumulate capital at whatever cost to the natural and human worlds. At the same time as horrific tendencies of racism and nationalism gradually developed under the influence of an *inter-nationally* organized imperialistic capitalism, trends of depersonalization, regimentation, authoritarian control and monitoring of populations, and manufacturing authority-friendly popular attitudes through propaganda grew more pronounced. The relatively “personalistic” slavery of the antebellum American South gave way to the impersonal industrial slavery of the South in the 1890s and later.² The violent and tumultuous conquest of society by profit-driven market relations, not *humanizing* but *atomizing* and *instrumentalizing*, spread reifying habits of thought that reduced humans to numbers, calculations, agglomerations, categories, ideologies, foreign objects to be used and discarded. Ever-larger concentrations of capital and industry made possible and necessary ever-larger bureaucracies, with their diabolical Weberian “formal rationality” and “efficiency”—exquisite subordination of every human impulse to the order from on high, the administrative rule, the technique for the smooth functioning of power. Corporate capital and national governments matured

² See Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009).

together, intertwining in their policy formation and administrative machinery, the interests of one often becoming the interests of the other, each requiring for the sake of its power that social dissent be regulated or eradicated and domestic capital continue accumulating. In an over-competitive capitalist world, the obsession of big business with big profits led to nationalistic protectionism, tariff wars, conquest of colonial markets, the “scramble for Africa,” an international arms race that exalted “blood and iron” as supreme values, and ideologies of national and racial grandeur to justify all this imperialism. A brutalization of the human spirit proceeded apace, particularly as savage colonial wars and amoral colonial administration trained bureaucrats in the efficient use of pure violence to attain the ends of power.³ World War I brought imperialist brutality home to Europe, intensifying it exponentially in the process. Afterwards, millions of shattered, defeated, resentful, homeless men roamed the continent, seething with rage against this society that had forgotten them, directing their rage at scapegoats readymade by the ruling class’s ongoing demonization of them: Socialists, Communists, Jews, foreign peoples, effete intellectuals—anything and anyone whose targeting would distract from class structures. Again capitalism plunged into crisis: the Great Depression happened, which raised fears among ruling classes that organized labor or even Communists would attain political power. To prevent this, in a political environment of gridlock and dysfunction, conservatives and big business turned in desperation to the fascist movements that had spread in the 1920s, which they thought they could control. They installed Hitler, and elsewhere in

³ See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1958). Nikolai Bukharin, *Imperialism and World Economy* (International Publishers Co., 1929) is a good analysis of the sources and nature of imperialism.

Europe fascist parties made significant headway.⁴ Under Hitler, finally, all the nefarious tendencies of Western civilization that had been building for decades and centuries were unleashed in a *danse macabre* that culminated in the most unfathomable enormity in history, the Holocaust. The racism, the institutional and ideological “categorizing” of people, the enslavement and genocide of the Other, the efficient doing-away-with superfluous people (the Jews were made stateless so that no government had to protect them), the impersonal cost-benefit mode of thinking, and the totalitarian aspects of bureaucracy, states, corporations, capitalism itself, were all perfected—the principle of submission to authority was deified. It should be noted that Nazism and the Holocaust were singularly compatible with corporate capitalism: big business all over the West cooperated with and funded the Nazis (at least until that became politically inexpedient in Allied countries during World War II), who performed a useful service in destroying the German labor movement; and Jewish slave labor was gratefully used by politically connected companies. Nor is there any inherent reason why business should object to genocide, which, in fact, can be profitable for firms lucky enough to get the contracts.⁵ Clear elective affinities

⁴ See, e.g., Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005); Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); and Daniel Guérin, *Fascism and Big Business* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1939).

⁵ As Rubenstein argues, “both genocide and slave labor proved to be highly profitable enterprises... The business of mass murder was both a highly complex and successful corporate venture,” as it has always been during the imperialistic age from the 1870s to the recent Iraq war. After all, “the same attitude of impersonal rationality is required to run successfully a large corporation, a death camp slave factory and an extermination center. All three are part of the same world.” *The Cunning of History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 60, 62. The thoroughly capitalist nature of the Nazi regime is made clear in Ernest Mandel’s *The Meaning of the Second World War* (London: Verso, 1986).

exist between the anti-humanism of capitalism—everything subordinated to the mania for profit, workers ideally being pushed down to a starvation diet for the sake of profits (or, even better, being eliminated entirely through mechanization and automation)—and the anti-humanism of Nazism, which subordinates everything to the mania for power. The superfluity of *humanity* to capitalism was made literally manifest in the superfluity of individuality, personality, and millions of physical beings to state-capitalist totalitarianism—such that the death-factories can perhaps be considered an apt symbol of modernity itself. —In short, far from being a betrayal of Western values, the Holocaust was the *apotheosis* of some of the most deep-seated, albeit implicit, Western values and social structures. Even if it hadn't happened, the catastrophe it signified would have anyway, namely the elimination of human connections in mass society and in the dominant institutions of modern civilization. This plague of multifarious inhumanity has by no means been overcome since World War II; it has only assumed different forms in an age in which explicit racism and virulent nationalism have gone out of style.

*

To see the Holocaust in a grain of sand.— While the industrialized murder of six million people is in a category all its own, one can observe in daily life many of the tendencies that make it possible. The thinking that sees the machinery of death as solely a thing of the past, an incomprehensible anomaly that we have decisively overcome in our more enlightened age, is deeply embedded in us but, as the “enormous condescension of posterity” always is, deeply wrong. One needn't invoke the obvious monstrosities to show how a semi-Holocaustic spirit, a spirit of distanced disregard for all human and natural considerations (including the very survival of the species), still suffuses our society. One needn't, for instance, point to the U.S.'s bureaucratically administered near-annihilation of Vietnam

for the sake of preventing a national liberation movement from starting a “domino effect.” One needn’t mention the U.S.’s provision of arms to Indonesia between the 1970s and 1990s with which to slaughter hundreds of thousands of East Timorese, nor the Reagan administration’s torture of Central America to “shock and awe” the population into acceptance of reactionary governments and domination by U.S. business. One needn’t invoke the Clinton administration’s murder of maybe half a million Iraqi children by means of economic sanctions, nor the second Bush administration’s destruction of Iraq to get control of the country’s oil and benefit politically connected companies like Halliburton, nor, in general, any of the *thousands* of heinous Western political crimes documented in books by Noam Chomsky, Alexander Cockburn, Edward Said, Naomi Klein, Jeremy Scahill, left-wing historians like Gabriel Kolko and Walter LaFeber, and too many other critical voices to list. It’s not even necessary to mention the most recent abominations of drone warfare—murder by video-game—or killing of particular people (including American citizens) by executive fiat, or indefinite detention without trial, or construction of a surveillance state that dwarfs anything even dreamed of by Hitler or Stalin.⁶ All this is in direct continuity with traditions that eventuated in the Holocaust, but to discuss these obscenities is superfluous. It makes it too easy for me to make my case.

No, I see the machinery of death—can’t help seeing it—in the very *words* spoken by low-level bureaucrats, in gestures of contempt by police officers (quite apart from rampant police brutality), in someone’s command to “Get away, this is private property!,” in a corporation’s laying off a thousand workers for the sake of the bottom line, in pop culture’s erasure of individuality, in academia’s enforcement of “politically neutral” scholarly norms, in intellectuals’

⁶ That’s not hyperbole. They couldn’t have fathomed the possibility of collecting billions of records every day of the most insignificant personal interactions.

use of the Holocaust to justify Israeli apartheid (or slander those who criticize it), and in the very *anonymous* structure of capitalist mass society. When an airport security guard callously rifles through someone's luggage or behaves in an intentionally brutish way—indeed, when an airport employee simply commands you, in the *I-will-not-be-contradicted* tone of authority, to step back behind the line because it's not your turn yet—the kernel of moral horror and human degeneration is evident. When an employee says, "I'm sorry, it's the rules; I didn't make them, I just follow them," he has already placed one foot on the path to Nazism. All it takes now is the right circumstances and a succession of nudges for him to become a gas-chamber attendant or an SS officer. For he has forsaken rationality, independence, freedom, sympathy for others, and absolved himself of responsibility and the need to have a conscience. Because of its rarity, few things impress me more than when someone "doing his job" momentarily disregards the rules and makes an exception for you out of his sympathy. "The fee is twenty dollars," he says, "but forget it, I'll waive that." A glimmer of humanity! "Maybe there's hope for the species after all," I then think. But I'm quickly disabused of that delusion when I reflect on the absence of rationality and compassion in social relations themselves, a fact that pressures us all to act in socially irrational and impersonally cruel ways.

Even the most seemingly innocent and ubiquitous actions can have the seed of anti-personal amorality—lack of identification with others, or groupthink and mindless conformism, contempt for people who are "different" or don't follow the common norms—that bears fruit in Nazism and genocide. He who ignores a homeless person on the street has the stain of moral corruption in him, however he rationalizes his behavior. (So much the worse for humanity that we all do that, from time to time.) He who automatically recoils from a working-class black or Hispanic or white man approaching him in the subway with a friendly air, just to talk, must

be profoundly alienated from his fellow human beings, a stranger to them, unconcerned with the majority of them, in fact slightly disgusted by those who show a little independence vis-à-vis conventional styles of dress and behavior. Their fates, their lives and hardships, leave him cold; he simply doesn't care. This is usually true, indeed, even with respect to strangers who belong to one's own social stratum: since they're strangers, what happens to them is not a matter of concern.

"Men are accomplices to that which leaves them indifferent," George Steiner said.⁷ Are you indifferent to the suffering of another person, whether in the neighboring house or on the other side of the world? Then, in a sense, you're an accomplice to it. You let it happen—or you may even indirectly participate in it, say by paying taxes to a militaristic government. After World War II people reproached themselves and were reproached for their silence as the Holocaust was happening, their *having done nothing to make it stop*. Well, why is that question not asked now? The world is in as much agony as ever, and most people are as silent as ever. Nothing has changed. Even now, as in the 1940s, people are being systematically murdered, tortured, enslaved, made superfluous by the *hundreds of millions* (being herded into gargantuan slums where they merely subsist animal-like,⁸ or, in the U.S., being imprisoned *en masse* for having black skin and not having a vital economic role in society). The point isn't only that "all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing"; it is that modern, impersonal evil largely *consists of* people doing seemingly nothing—following rules, showing indifference, ignoring the plea for help. That way lies barbarism.

Of course there are other manifestations of the barbarity. It isn't only because of individual stupidity that millions of Americans deny global warming, detest homosexuals, revile "liberals," and

⁷ George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 150.

⁸ See Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2005).

nurse secret race-hatred. It isn't only, or even mainly, an individual's genes that make possible the phenomenon of the latently fascist "authoritarian personality."⁹ There are far more diabolical social forces at work. Such stupid and prejudiced attitudes, which by their nature cannot be based on dispassionate reasoning about facts or impartial openness to experiences, to new people and new ideas—such attitudes well up out of the impersonal, defensive, diffusely resentful, beset-from-all-sides mode of experience that has disfigured so many millions of minds since mass society made the individual superfluous. Without self-validation, one becomes a moral and intellectual homunculus. To some extent we moderns are all *les étrangers*, but evidently some feel more so than others—often from their greater material grievances—and embrace in their alienation emotional notions of belongingness versus otherness, Us versus Them. Contempt and hatred for the outsider, comforting submission to the authority of the insider. The question is, who will get to these alienated masses first, the left or the right? As it turns out, the right has far more resources than the left, since the right is precisely big business, and so the winners in the race are usually the forces that blame all woes on everything except the one thing that matters, class. And so instead of a more productive semi-submission to left-wing authority—(for, after all, there *is* an authoritarianism of the "left," an undemocratic institutional and personality structure, deplorably common among leftist political parties and fringe groups)—what you get is a counterproductive submission to fascist authority. And thus a pullulating of radically illogical thinking,

⁹ Theodor Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950). The spread of contemporary semi-fascist movements and parties has revived interest in this concept, and recent work largely validates Adorno and his colleagues' conclusions. See, for example, William F. Stone, Gerda Lederer, and Richard Christie, eds., *Strength and Weakness: The Authoritarian Personality Today* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1993).

which, combined with mass anonymity and impersonality, gets you—the Holocaust. Or, more recently, *enthusiastic marching into global environmental destruction*, the goose-stepping elite leading its goose-stepping followers straight off the cliff.

The market mode of behavior is therefore, humanistically speaking, the twin of the authoritarian, or rather totalitarian, mode of behavior. Corporations, of course, are totalitarian entities (hierarchies that rent employees, suppress dissent, enforce a common ideology, etc.), and capitalism is just fragmented totalitarianism, profit-making machines competing against each other and trying to destroy each other. An unfortunate externality of which is the destruction of life and nature. So, in addition to plowing full steam ahead to end millions of species and hundreds of millions of human lives, companies have now accomplished the grotesquerie of profiting *by means of* this very apocalypse. Capitalism can make money from its own self-immolation! For example, companies are buying water rights and farmland because “drought and food shortages can mean big profit”; the greater frequency of natural disasters means insurers can raise rates; and melting ice in the Arctic exposes oil reserves for BP and Shell to exploit.¹⁰ Just as a brave new world of *species*-holocaust lies ahead, so new frontiers of profit thus tantalize our intrepid corporate world-conquerors. *Vive* capitalism and its commodification of all!

—The point, however, is that the potential for humanity’s self-extinction by means of Weberian formal rationality—methodical calculation, quantitative reasoning, mechanical adoption of the proper means to an end—is implicit not only in the operation of any bureaucracy but also in the simplest market transaction. For each side seeks personal profit of some sort in disregard of “externalities”

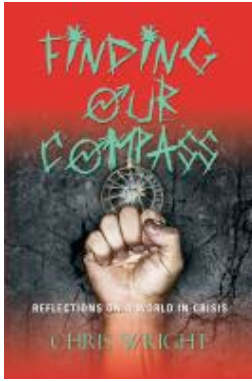
¹⁰ Julia Greenberg, “6 Industries That Will Profit From Global Warming,” *Wired*, February 27, 2014; Matthew Campbell and Chris V. Nicholson, “Investors Seek Ways to Profit From Global Warming,” *Business Week*, March 7, 2013.

and non-market values. Someone with an idealist turn of mind could even interpret the modern world, in Hegelian fashion, as a progressive, dialectical unfolding of all the human and anti-human dimensions latent in the logic of the market transaction, revealed as the all-devouring market economy has colonized the world.¹¹ All the modern reduction of people and nature to commodities, and the mass movements of workers' resistance, and the extermination of whole peoples, and the despairing cultural reactions against market-driven alienation, and the subordination of society and politics to the power of money—a left-wing Hegel would say it's all there, in potentiality, in the mere act of selling a product to a customer for a profit. —Cosmic evil can be present in a grain of sand.

*

Collectivism.— Collectivism comes in both noble and evil forms. In the former, the principle of the individual is paramount; in the latter, the principle of the mass. The one means the rule of mutual self-actualization, self-respect, sympathy for others, democracy, human diversity—“an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all,” to quote Karl Marx. It is, in short, authentic community and sociality, healthy equality, a state of society in which, to quote Hegel, individuals recognize the self in the other and the other in the self, humans as human, rational beings as rational—freedom and dignity personified, one's desire for the other's recognition calling forth one's own powers and potentialities. Perhaps never fully realized on a large scale, this anarchist ideal of free and dignified (though not conflictless) community can at least be approximated—as it is, for example, in many grassroots-democratic activist groups, not to mention families, friendships, and relationships between lovers—and *must* so be in

¹¹ See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944).



In a series of free-wheeling reflections and summaries of scholarship, this book reinterprets history and culture along anarchist lines. From a Marxian point of view, it illuminates capitalism, U.S. history, popular culture, gender relations, and human psychology, even the nature of the fascinating concepts "genius" and "greatness." Its agenda is that of the 17th-century Levellers: deflate the pomposities of elite authority, and bring the world down to the level of democratic reason.

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