

America Is in Need of a Moral Bailout

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In decaying societies, politics become theater. The elite, who have hollowed out the democratic system to serve the corporate state, rule through image and presentation. They express indignation at AIG bonuses and empathy with a working class they have spent the last few decades disenfranchising, and make promises to desperate families that they know will never be fulfilled. Once the spotlights go on they read their lines with appropriate emotion. Once the lights go off, they make sure Goldman Sachs and a host of other large corporations have the hundreds of billions of dollars in losses they incurred playing casino capitalism repaid with taxpayer money.

We live in an age of moral nihilism. We have trashed our universities, turning them into vocational factories that produce corporate drones and chase after defense-related grants and funding. The humanities, the discipline that forces us to stand back and ask the broad moral questions of meaning and purpose, that challenges the validity of structures, that trains us to be self-reflective and critical of all cultural assumptions, have withered. Our press, which should promote such intellectual and moral questioning, confuses bread and circus with news and refuses to give a voice to critics who challenge not this bonus payment or that bailout but the pernicious superstructure of the corporate state itself. We kneel before a cult of the self, elaborately constructed by the architects of our consumer society, which dismisses compassion, sacrifice for the less fortunate, and honesty. The methods used to attain what we want, we are told by reality television programs, business schools and self-help gurus, are irrelevant. Success, always defined in terms of money and power, is its own justification. The capacity for manipulation is what is most highly prized. And our moral collapse is as terrifying, and as dangerous, as our economic collapse.

[Theodor Adorno](#) in 1967 wrote an essay called "[Education After Auschwitz.](#)" He argued that the moral corruption that made the Holocaust possible remained "largely unchanged." He wrote that "the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds" must be made visible. Schools had to teach more than skills. They had to teach values. If they did not, another Auschwitz was always possible.

"All political instruction finally should be centered upon the idea that Auschwitz should never happen again," he wrote. "This would be possible only when it devotes itself openly, without fear of offending any authorities, to this most important of problems. To do this, education must transform itself into sociology, that is, it must teach about the societal play of forces that operates beneath the surface of political forms."

Our elites are imploding. Their fraud and corruption are slowly being exposed as the disparity between their words and our reality becomes wider and more apparent. The rage that is bubbling up across the country will have to be countered by the elite with less subtle

forms of control. But unless we grasp the “societal play of forces that operates beneath the surface of political forms” we will be cursed with a more ruthless form of corporate power, one that does away with artifice and the seduction of a consumer society and instead wields power through naked repression.

I had lunch a few days ago in Toronto with [Henry Giroux](#), professor of English and cultural studies at McMaster University in Canada and who for many years was the Waterbury Chair Professor at Penn State. Giroux, who has been one of the most prescient and vocal critics of the corporate state and the systematic destruction of American education, was driven to the margins of academia because he kept asking the uncomfortable questions Adorno knew should be asked by university professors. He left the United States in 2004 for Canada.

“The emergence of what Eisenhower had called the military-industrial-academic complex had secured a grip on higher education that may have exceeded even what he had anticipated and most feared,” Giroux, who wrote [“The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex,”](#) told me. “Universities, in general, especially following the events of 9/11, were under assault by Christian nationalists, reactionary neoconservatives and market fundamentalists for allegedly representing the weak link in the war on terrorism. Right-wing students were encouraged to spy on the classes of progressive professors, the corporate grip on the university was tightening as made clear not only in the emergence of business models of governance, but also in the money being pumped into research and programs that blatantly favored corporate interests. And at Penn State, where I was located at the time, the university had joined itself at the hip with corporate and military power. Put differently, corporate and Pentagon money was now funding research projects and increasingly knowledge was being militarized in the service of developing weapons of destruction, surveillance and death. Couple this assault with the fact that faculty were becoming irrelevant as an oppositional force. Many disappeared into discourses that threatened no one, some simply were too scared to raise critical issues in their classrooms for fear of being fired, and many simply no longer had the conviction to uphold the university as a democratic public sphere.”

Frank Donoghue, the author of [“The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities,”](#) details how liberal arts education has been dismantled. Any form of learning that is not strictly vocational has at best been marginalized and in many schools has been abolished. Students are steered away from asking the broad, disturbing questions that challenge the assumptions of the power elite or an economic system that serves the corporate state. This has led many bright graduates into the arms of corporate entities they do not examine morally or ethically. They accept the assumptions of corporate culture because they have never been taught to think.

Only 8 percent of U.S. college graduates now receive [degrees in the humanities](#), about 110,000 students. Between 1970 and 2001, bachelor’s degrees in English declined from 7.6 percent to 4 percent, as did degrees in foreign languages (2.4 percent to 1 percent), mathematics (3 percent to 1 percent), social science and history (18.4 percent to 10 percent). Bachelor’s degrees in business, which promise the accumulation of wealth, have skyrocketed. Business majors since 1970-1971 have risen from 13.6 percent of the graduation population to 21.7 percent. Business has now replaced education, which has fallen from 21 percent to 8.2 percent, as the most popular major.

The values that sustain an open society have been crushed. A university, as [John Ralston](#)

[Saul](#) writes, now “actively seeks students who suffer from the appropriate imbalance and then sets out to exaggerate it. Imagination, creativity, moral balance, knowledge, common sense, a social view-all these things wither. Competitiveness, having an ever-ready answer, a talent for manipulating situations-all these things are encouraged to grow. As a result amorality also grows; as does extreme aggressivity when they are questioned by outsiders; as does a confusion between the nature of good versus having a ready answer to all questions. Above all, what is encouraged is the growth of an undisciplined form of self-interest, in which winning is what counts.”

This moral nihilism would have terrified Adorno. He knew that radical evil was possible only with the collaboration of a timid, cowed and confused population, a system of propaganda and a press that offered little more than spectacle and entertainment and an educational system that did not transmit transcendent values or nurture the capacity for individual conscience. He feared a culture that banished the anxieties and complexities of moral choice and embraced a childish hyper-masculinity, one championed by ruthless capitalists (think of the brutal backstabbing and deception cheered by TV shows like “Survivor”) and Hollywood action heroes like the governor of California.

“This educational ideal of hardness, in which many may believe without reflecting about it, is utterly wrong,” Adorno wrote. “The idea that virility consists in the maximum degree of endurance long ago became a screen-image for masochism that, as psychology has demonstrated, aligns itself all too easily with sadism.”

Sadism is as much a part of popular culture as it is of corporate culture. It dominates pornography, runs like an electric current through reality television and trash-talk programs and is at the core of the compliant, corporate collective. Corporatism is about crushing the capacity for moral choice. And it has its logical fruition in Abu Ghraib, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and our lack of compassion for the homeless, our poor, the mentally ill, the unemployed and the sick.

“The political and economic forces fuelling such crimes against humanity-whether they are unlawful wars, systemic torture, practiced indifference to chronic starvation and disease or genocidal acts-are always mediated by educational forces,” Giroux said. “Resistance to such acts cannot take place without a degree of knowledge and self-reflection. We have to name these acts and transform moral outrage into concrete attempts to prevent such human violations from taking place in the first place.”

The single most important quality needed to resist evil is moral autonomy. Moral autonomy, as Immanuel Kant wrote, is possible only through reflection, self-determination and the courage not to cooperate.

Moral autonomy is what the corporate state, with all its attacks on liberal institutions and “leftist” professors, has really set out to destroy. The corporate state holds up as our ideal what Adorno called “the manipulative character.” The manipulative character has superb organizational skills and the inability to have authentic human experiences. He or she is an emotional cripple and driven by an overvalued realism. The manipulative character is a systems manager. He or she exclusively trained to sustain the corporate structure, which is why our elites are wasting mind-blowing amounts of our money on corporations like

Goldman Sachs and AIG. “He makes a cult of action, activity, of so-called efficiency as such which reappears in the advertising image of the active person,” Adorno wrote of this personality type. These manipulative characters, people like Lawrence Summers, Henry Paulson, Robert Rubin, Ben Bernanke, Timothy Geithner, AIG’s Edward Liddy and Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein, along with most of our ruling class, have used corporate money and power to determine the narrow parameters of the debate in our classrooms, on the airwaves and in the halls of Congress while they looted the country.

“It is especially difficult to fight against it,” warned Adorno, “because those manipulative people, who actually are incapable of true experience, for that very reason manifest an unresponsiveness that associates them with certain mentally ill or psychotic characters, namely schizoids.”

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