

American Irrationalism. Something is Terribly Wrong

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There is no shortage of signs of impending environmental catastrophe, including the melting of the polar ice caps and the rise of atmospheric carbon to above [400 parts per million](#). The earth's [sixth mass extinction](#) is underway. It is not taking place because of planetary forces. Homo sapiens is orchestrating it. Americans are at the same time bankrupting themselves by waging endless and unwinnable wars. We have allowed our elites to push more than half the U.S. population into poverty through deindustrialization.

We do nothing to halt the waves of nihilistic violence by enraged citizens who carry out periodic mass shootings in schools, malls, movie theaters and other public places. The political and financial elites flaunt their greed and corruption.

Donald Trump appears to pay no federal income taxes.

Hillary and Bill Clinton use their foundation as a tool for legalized bribery. Our largest corporations have orchestrated a legal tax boycott.

The judicial system is a subsidiary of the corporate state.

Militarized police conduct public executions of unarmed people of color.

Our infrastructure, including our schools, roads and bridges, along with our deindustrialized cities, are in ruins. Decay and rot—physical and moral—are pervasive.

We are blinded to our depressing reality by the avalanche of images disseminated by mass media. Political, intellectual and cultural discourse has been replaced with spectacle. Emotionalism and sensationalism are prized over truth. Highly paid pundits who parrot back the official narrative, corporate advertisers, inane talk shows, violent or sexually explicit entertainment and gossip-fueled news have contaminated cultural life. “Reality” television, as contrived as every other form of mass entertainment, has produced a “reality” presidential candidate.

Mass culture, because it speaks to us in easily digestible clichés and stereotypes, reinforces ignorance, bigotry and racism. It promotes our individual and collective self-glorification. It sanctifies nonexistent national virtues. It takes from us the intellectual and linguistic tools needed to separate illusion from truth. It is all show business all the time.



The false values of reality TV have been carried over into the current presidential race.

Shown here, Donald Trump on “The Apprentice.” (NBC)

There are millions of Americans who know that something is terribly wrong. A light has gone out. They see this in their own suffering and hopelessness and the suffering and hopelessness of their neighbors. But they lack, because of the contamination of our political, cultural and intellectual discourse, the words and ideas to make sense of what is happening around them. They are bereft of a vision. Austerity, globalization, unfettered capitalism, an expansion of the extraction of fossil fuels, and war are not the prices to be paid for progress and the advance of civilization. They are part of the savage and deadly exploitation by corporate capitalism and imperialism. They serve a [neoliberal ideology](#). The elites dare not speak this truth. It is toxic. They peddle the seductive illusions that saturate the airwaves. We are left to strike out at shadows. We are led to succumb to the racism, allure of white supremacy and bigotry that always accompany a culture in dissolution.

We cannot, for this reason, discount the possibility that Trump will be elected president. The election outcome will be decided by whatever emotion Americans feel when they cast their ballots.

Celebrity narratives, manufactured pseudo-drama, sex scandals, natural disasters, insults and invective, mass shootings and war flash before us in a constant jumble of images on ubiquitous screens. The sensory assault obliterates reality. A former congressman who [sends a picture](#) of himself in underwear to a woman is a national news story. Sober examinations of our economic, foreign, judicial and environmental policies are dismissed as too complicated and boring. They do not produce engaging images. The electronic media’s sole goal is to attract viewers and advertising dollars. It has conditioned us to demand a nonstop vaudeville act.

Because of this mass indoctrination, we have become infected by what Daniel Boorstin in “[The Image](#): A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America” calls “social narcissism.” The bottomless narcissism of Trump and the Clintons caters to this social narcissism. They reflect back to us our desperate longing for, as well as celebration of, entertainment, celebrity, wealth, power and self-aggrandizement. It is not only advertising and public relations, as Boorstin pointed out, that carry out the incessant manufacturing of illusions that feed social narcissism.

Journalists, book publishers, politicians, athletes, entertainers, positive psychologists, self-help gurus, the Christian right and talk show hosts all feed the mania for illusion. They all chant the insane mantra that reality is *never* an impediment to what we desire. We can have anything we want if we work hard, get an education, believe in ourselves, grasp that we are exceptional and see the impossible as always possible. It is magical thinking. And magical thinking is the only real commodity the elites have left to offer us. Make American Great Again. Or American already is great. Take your pick of idiotic clichés.

“We tyrannize and frustrate ourselves by expecting more than the world can give us or than we can make of the world,” Boorstin wrote.

“We demand that everyone who talks to us, or writes for us, or takes pictures for us, or makes merchandise for us, should live in our world of extravagant expectations. We expect this even of the peoples of foreign countries. We have become so accustomed to our illusions that we mistake them for reality. We demand them. And we demand that there be always more of them, bigger and

better and more vivid.”

The incessant search for instant gratification and the most appealing image, including the image of ourselves we manufacture for others on social media, has robbed us of the ability to examine ourselves and our society. It has extinguished the truth. The terminal decline of the American empire, the utter inability our elites to manage anything important, the climate crisis, widespread poverty and despair do not fit with the illusion. So these realities are blotted from public consciousness. The poor are rendered invisible. The foreign policy debacles will be fixed with more bombs. Only the Soviet and fascist dictatorships, along with the medieval Catholic Church, controlled thought as effectively.

Candidates Trump and Clinton have no plans to halt our slide to oblivion. They are part of the circus. They, like all of the other elites, profit from the system that is destroying us. They lack the incentive and probably the capacity to challenge the structures and assumptions that define corporate capitalism. They function as high priests. They peddle the illusions. They laud our ingenuity and strength. They preach the inevitability of human progress and American exceptionalism. They tell us what we want to hear. They appeal to our emotions, as does all of mass culture. They do not acknowledge reality. That would spoil the show.

We vote for slogans, manufactured personalities, perceived sincerity, personal attractiveness and the crafted personal narratives peddled by candidates. Office seekers create the illusion of intimacy established between celebrities and their audiences. We see ourselves in them; admirers of the “winner” Trump see themselves as becoming him. No politician succeeds without such artifice. Today’s politics is just one more product of a diseased culture. Our political leaders are much like the celebrities who, in Boorstin’s words, “are receptacles into which we pour our own purposelessness. They are nothing but ourselves seen in a magnifying mirror.”

The incoherent absurdities mouthed for our amusement induce a state of permanent amnesia. Life is lived in an eternal present. How we got here, where we came from, what shaped us as a society, in short the continuum of history that gives us an identity, are eradicated.

The quest for identity through mass culture is self-defeating. We can never achieve what these illusions tell us we can achieve. We can never be who we want to be. It is a ceaseless chase from one chimera to the next. And this is why at the end we fall into despair and rage. It is why huge parts of the country no longer hold genuine political ideas. It is why people vote according to how they feel. It is why hatred and fear are a potent political platform. It is why we are sleepwalking into oblivion.

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