

The Canaries that Sang “Things Suck”

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Theme: [History](#)

Global Research, August 04, 2019

Don't get me wrong. I am not foul-mouthed or in any way vulgar, having been trained in the niceties of academic discretionary writing and research. I apologize for the title and even for using the personal pronoun "I." As "one" knows, to write as if you are a person with values and beliefs is very crude in the academy from which so many of our finest national priorities, like perpetual war-making and economic exploitation, emanate.

In this case, however, I must use certain language that may be offensive to some sensitive folks in order to explain my thesis in the hope that it will encourage others to grasp why so many of our compatriots of every sex and gender dispensation imaginable have become such suckers. I hope you will grant the importance of such an endeavor and excuse the means used to achieve its ends.

Let me say this at the outset. To say something sucks has always confused me. I have asked many people how something – let's say a pizza – could suck, and they have just rolled their eyes. I know a vacuum cleaner can suck and a sump pump can suck or is it pump, but after that, I'm lost. How can a movie suck? Spaghetti? You can suck it but can it suck? You see my point?

Perhaps you have heard the saying that “there is a sucker born every minute.” That seems to me to be so off statistically. Do you agree? What's your estimate for the birth rate of suckers: a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand a minute? I don't know, but my theory or thesis, if you will, is not statistically based. And let's not get into that ridiculous debate about nature versus nurture. We both no doubt agree that suckers are both born and bred in the USA at a feverish rate.

I am a social theorist, not a statistician, so please just consider my theory. I can assure you that there is no conspiracy involved in it, since all the variables I note are well-known, if forgotten, by the general public.

In this article I will touch on a few, for if I went on too long you might think this article sucked, despite the incongruity of your lingo. Indeed, there is an enormous amount of academic research to support my thesis, but this is not the place for footnotes or references. Trust me, as you do CNN or The New York Times.

It was in the early 1990s when I first noticed that many people were saying things “sucked” an awful lot. I would have thought that after the great American TV victory in the Gulf War and the election of the fresh-faced, forthright young governor from Arkansas to lead the ship of state, the sucking lingo would die down. No way! The pace picked up quite dramatically throughout the nineties. Movies sucked, the party sucked, the concert sucked – so much was starting to suck it frightened me, and I'm not easily frightened, having been toughened up in the academy with its fierce in-fighting over trivia and its short vacations.

There wasn't a "ton" of such sucking in those early days, but this way of talking struck me anyway. "Ton" wasn't cool yet. The heaviness of our new social reality hadn't fully sunk in yet; the massive growth in depression was just getting started. It was just "it sucks"/"that sucks" that was hot in those years. I started to wonder if this little phrase was a harbinger of things to come, the unconscious canary in the national mine shaft, the lack of breathable air shortening people's verbal responses to a growing unreality.

One day I was in the checkout line in a supermarket when a very elderly woman got into an argument with the checkout girl. The girl had charged the old woman twice for her *National Enquirer*, or so the old one said. The girl denied it and showed the old woman the receipt, which failed to mollify her. She stormed away, shouting, "That sucks. You suck." I couldn't help laughing, so incongruous was the scene. But I took note as a good academic should, and started to collect the variables that would eventually result in my present argument, one that has involved almost thirty years of diligent thinking and research, so I hope you will appreciate its significance. I would hate to think my years of toiling in the academy were for naught.

After the loud sound of all things sucking came the fear of being dehydrated, as if everyone, even people walking through Central Park in New York City, were lost in the Sahara Desert and were afraid they might collapse into a sere heap without constant water intake. I guess you can never be too careful. Everywhere you looked, there were people sucking on those plastic water bottles that sprung up like locusts. To be without one was then akin to being without one's cell phone today. Mr. Death seemed to be stalking the bottleless ones, those not sucking. But to be more precise, people didn't exactly suck on the bottles until the sports tops were added. I heard there was a very creative entrepreneur who tried introducing water bottles with baby bottle rubber nipples, but that was too suggestive then, since adults were just starting to dress like kids and the kidification of adults had to be somewhat disguised in those early days.

Come on, can you imagine if you saw a forty-five-year-old man in a Yankee jersey and hat, walking around sucking on a plastic water bottle with a baby nipple. That would be too much, too fast, even if you were a Yankee fan. You could say the Red Sox sucked, but you couldn't be seen to be so obviously sucking yourself.

Then there was that cool cat, Bill Clinton. Whenever you turned on the TV or glanced at a newspaper, there he was out jogging or walking with a huge soda or something, sucking away on the straw. Or blowing on that horn on Saturday Night Live. It almost seemed like the poor guy had an oral complex or something. On the golf course where he was often pictured, he and his pals had big cigars they sucked on, making cigar sucking very popular. The magazine, *Cigar Aficionado*, born in the fall of 1992 when Bill and Hill so sincerely refuted those Paula Jones sexual allegations and won the White House, would soon publish covers with famous actresses fondling cigars in a not so subtle come-on. Stores everywhere had humidors hawking them. Sucking on quart sized drinks and cigars took the country by storm, and please, I am not alluding to Stormy Daniels and her lurid tales, which come later. I am just listing some of the many variables that I have spent my academic career gathering in preparation for the release of my upcoming book that I hope will be my crowning achievement: *Sucking and Suckers: A Qualitative Study*.

This cigar craze got so wild that one day I walked into my local liquor store and the owner showed me his new humidor. He said, "Jack, you should try one on me." I said I didn't

smoke, to which he replied, "But you really should just try one, they make you feel powerful, like a big man."

I told him I felt big, capacious, and enormous already, sort of like Walt Whitman, who said, "I am large, I contain multitudes." He just rolled his eyes and lit up.

I was reminded of a quote from Wilhelm Reich's book, *Listen, Little Man*, a long-forgotten book that is perfect for today:

A great man knows and in what way he is a little man. A little man does not know he is little and is afraid to know. He hides his pettiness and narrowness behind illusions of strength and greatness, someone else's strength and greatness.

And behind his cigar and bluster.

Then came Monica and Bill. I guess the cigars weren't enough, or the occupancy of the big White House, or eight years of continual bombing of Iraq and sanctions that killed well over 500,000 Iraqi children, or making all those sexed-up welfare queens with all their babies scream when he did away with welfare as we know it, or his sadistic bombing of Serbia and the El Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Sudan. It seems as though nothing is sufficient to make war criminals feel big enough.

Excuse the politics. I'm getting carried away from my theme, which sucks. Okay, there was Monica. But I will leave it to your imagination, if you dare. Sorry for being crude.

Variable number four or five are those pacifier necklaces, as if eight years of Bill hadn't been pacifier enough. Do you remember them? Did their wearers suck on them, or was a message being sent? Then came the oral sex craze among the young, serendipitously connected to Bill and Monica. Stuff happens.

Perhaps for me, in my academic life, my eureka moment came one day in the early 2000s when I was teaching a class on the growing cleavage between the rich and the poor. Bush Jr. had the country pacified and simultaneously whipped into a war frenzy after the attacks of 9/11. He was lying his way to the invasion of Iraq after having been "accidentally" rescued from a disastrous economy by those nineteen Arab terrorists with boxcutters. I was explaining to the students, mostly college juniors and seniors, how the percentage of the very wealthy had been increasing for years and the poor and middle-class were suffering, when I looked down to see a pretty female student in the front row. Bingo! Instant insight, or was it oversight? I was about to say something wise about the economic gap but my voice cracked. Right at my feet was an example of a different form of cleavage that had my eyes quickly popping up to look straight ahead as if I didn't see what I saw. Right there was a culminating variable that I was able to notice for many years to come. Call it the cleavage phenomenon, but it was real, and it could be seen throughout the classrooms and byways of America ever since. I will let you take it from there.

Over the following years, I continued to collect my evidence for the phenomenon I call "suck." But I also noticed that under Bush Jr, as under Poppi Bush and Clinton, people were increasingly being taken for suckers by the authorities with their lies about Iraq, 9/11, the anthrax attacks, the economy, the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the war on terror, etc. It's true, I know, that the same happened under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, but he was generally considered an acting president and life in the 1980s a feel-good movie.

Everyone was happy then, and suck was just a bad word that could spoil the fun of “Morning in America.”

When in 2008 Bush Jr. returned to the ranch and full-time brush cutting, in rode Obama. Slicker than Slick Willy, he really sucker-punched liberals, who were desperate for some classy speech in the White House, someone who could correctly pronounce “nuclear” while promising to spend a trillion dollars on making a new generation of them. They got conned (I guess) when he immediately bailed out the banks and the Wall St. crooks, sent more troops to Afghanistan, cracked down on whistle-blowers, launched killer drones, increased surveillance, destroyed Libya and Syria, sent special forces throughout Africa, etc., smiling as he went marauding.

The power of the Obama propaganda was overwhelming, and so many were sucked in, as they still are. I started to wonder if my years of cultural research on the significance of suck, sucking, and suckers was a waste of my life. Maybe I had missed the bigger issues, having made diversity and sexuality my focus of teaching and research, since they had become the rage in academia.

Then Trump shocked the world with his election and Stormy Daniels burst forth and the rich got richer and the poor poorer and the wars continued and the little-big man tweeted out his foul rantings about immigrants and so many others while the country further descended into a cesspool of insanity as he threatened North Korea and Iran with nuclear annihilation and his buddy Robert Kraft got his quick suck and the fascist Israeli government got his approval to continue slaughtering Palestinians and the deluded citizenry fixated on the 2020 election and the next con-artist who will promise to make things suck no longer.

But I have seen the light. While my thesis still seems valid to me, and the variables I have mentioned here (a fraction of the whole) demonstrate that there’s more to the seemingly trivial than meets the eye, I have concluded that the only thing I can conclude is that the American people are suckers and will continue to be so.

And I, too, have been a sucker for thinking that a simple, popular phrase wasn’t profoundly true from the start. I began as a hopeful young professor, thinking that I would debunk the crassness of our society and make a name for myself. I thought I was so smart.

Now, however, I have to admit that I was wrong from the beginning: things do suck. The canaries were right. Or to be more precise: the political elites who run the country suck. And the presidents suck big time.

That’s just the way it is.

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