

Why Are Americans Passive as Millions Lose Their Homes, Jobs, Families and the American Dream?

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An unnatural economic and psychological disaster has struck America. Five contributors, each interacting with and shaping the others, have devastated the American moral, economic, psychological, and social landscape. Each is fed by related streams, but each contributes its own force to the disaster. The American dream in which each generation surpassed the previous generation in real wages has all but disappeared, along with dreams of an intact family, a steady job, a home, and an honest supportive community.

This article looks at each of five collaborators in the crisis in order to answer the following questions:

How did this happen? What forces are responsible?

Why are Americans passive as millions lose their homes, their jobs, their families, their hopes of justice, and the American dream?

Why do Americans remain disorganized at home while their European and Asian counterparts flood into the streets and strike in militant, organized protest? Why do others believe in their potential to reclaim their lives while we do not?

What happened is a result of at least five major, interrelated forces. One is a transformation of American morality, and with it the loss of belief that the social and political realms could be shaped by morality, ethics, and secular spirituality. Another is an economic depression. A third is a transformation of the family, which has been the foundation of American emotional life. A fourth is the decimation of Americans' social participation in all areas, from bridge clubs and PTAs to political parties. A fifth is the tranquilizing and numbing of the American population with psychotropic medications.

1. The Crisis in Morality and Social Ethics

Let us begin with the first of our contributors: American ethics, morality, and spirituality. The same forces that decimated our economic, psychological, and social landscapes have transformed our sense of morality and social ethics. The shared dream of an ethical, moral society that dominated the United States until the 1970s has systematically eroded. In the 1960s it was common to believe that morality and spirituality include a concern for all human beings, rich and poor alike. The biggest push against those social ethics began with Reagan's presidency in 1981. It continued in Reagan's second term and was reinforced by each president until its (we hope) final act in the presidency of George W. Bush.

Reagan's basic ideology was that people are poor because they lack incentives. He claimed that poor people's noble drive to get rich is eroded by social programs that permit them to survive or, in his term, "freeload." In this framework, income tax cuts increase the incentive to work and get rich, so all are expected to benefit from them. In 1980 the highest incomes were taxed at 73 percent. In 2009 those same high incomes were taxed at half that rate, 35 percent. Of course the percentage of tax on the highest incomes is actually even lower, since the wealthiest Americans can hire tax accountants to help them evade taxes. Reagan used his famous veto power to cut a huge range of social programs from biomedical research, to social security for disabled Americans, to clean water, to expanded Head Start. At the same time, he increased the military budget while decrying big government.

That pattern has been repeated ever since, which is how, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States went from being the most egalitarian western industrialized society in 1970 to the least egalitarian in 2009.

In addition, the Soviet model of socialism failed. It did not provide the kind and ethical societies that are part of a socialist vision. The mass of people believed that the Soviet Union was communism. Left-wing class analyses of the failure of Soviet Communism, such as Bettelheim's in the late 1970s or Resnick and Wolff's in 2002, were not widely read or embraced. Both of those analyses demonstrate that the USSR and its satellites exemplified class societies in which a bureaucratic class appropriated wealth and made crucial decisions affecting the lives of the mass of people. They explain that the USSR failed because it was not a communist society. It was not a society in which the people in each workplace decided what to produce, and also collected their own profits and decided together how to distribute those profits. Because these left-wing class interpretations were few and largely unembraced, a socialist or communist dream seemed doomed to end in rigid, bureaucratic, and undemocratic societies that were rejected by their own people. People lost faith in a secular dream.

Slowly there has been a transformation of our morality and ethics. Where our morality once required the United States to embody our ethics in the world and empower all citizens, it has shifted so that our morality now consists of requiring conservative personal and sexual behavior. Within that morality Clinton committed an impeachable crime by lying about having sex with an intern, while Bush and Cheney did not commit impeachable crimes by lying about the threat from Iraq and thus causing the deaths of over four thousand U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians, or by torturing prisoners. It is not considered immoral to spend between six billion and twelve billion dollars a week on the war in Iraq while cutting school and social programs for needy families because "there is not enough money." The secular morality that made America a proudly democratic and egalitarian nation has deteriorated. We are experiencing a national moral, ethical, and spiritual crisis.

2. The Dying of the Economic Dream

A second contributor to American passivity is the economic crisis from which we are suffering. Let us look at our history in order to understand what happened. From 1820-1970, the United States experienced a unique period of ever-increasing prosperity. For 150 years, U.S. salaries rose together with ever-increasing worker productivity. For 150 years, each generation was able to afford a better standard of living than the generation that preceded it. That was the American dream.

Unlike their European counterparts, Americans did not enjoy working-class solidarity with other workers whose families and social organizations, unions and political parties were inflected by a history of overt class struggle fought as proudly permanent members of the working class. Europeans organized their working unions along political lines. They fought for better conditions as part of the ideology of long-term communist and socialist struggles for ownership and control of their workplaces.

The U.S. labor movement is not informed by a struggle for worker ownership of the businesses that produce U.S. goods and services. Decisions about what to produce and the right to appropriate and distribute profits are left to corporate boards of directors. Americans accepted the capitalist system in which each generation had relatively prospered. American labor fought for an increasing amount of income that would permit workers to consume more goods and services, a system in which each generation could move to jobs considered more prestigious and lucrative within the capitalist hierarchy. Blue-collar workers' children could become white-collar, and white-collar children could become professionals in the next generation (particularly if they were not just white-collar but white, period). U.S. growth permitted ever-increasing real wages and possibilities for consumption. Even in the Great Depression from 1929-1939, real wages, the amount that one could buy with one's wages, were able to rise because prices fell even faster than wages.

That ever-increasing prosperity stopped in 1970. By 1970 the introduction of computers, better telecommunications, and more efficient transportation enabled jobs to be outsourced to lower-paid workers overseas. Competing factories in Europe and Japan, which had been decimated by World War II, were now vying for U.S. markets. Then China emerged as a manufacturing giant. Competition reduced the U.S. share of both domestic and global markets. The outsourcing of American jobs to cheaper labor markets was not stopped by militant unions, which were unable to achieve the powerful "runaway shop" laws that were won in other nations. Nor did militant unions force the creation of a tight safety net to catch workers in financial distress.

For a long time, there was a relative scarcity of white male workers available for the jobs reserved for white males in America's racially and sexually segregated job markets. White male workers, who were accustomed to receiving increasing real wages and living a lifestyle of ever-greater consumption, could no longer support their families on their frozen wages. Americans' sense of self worth was in large part dependent on their net worth. They became increasingly depressed. Their sense of personal value was cut with their salaries. This happened as the advertising industry burgeoned. Advertising continuously and relentlessly sells consumption as the path to happiness. Consumption was undermined and with it stability, prosperity, and a sense of personal success.

3. What Produced the Crisis in Personal and Family Life?

Economic desperation pushed many more women into the labor force to increase money for the household. Previous to the 1970s, most white, nonimmigrant American women entered the labor force only in times of particular and urgent family need: upon divorce, or if a husband died, was ill, unemployed, or deserted his family. Women's labor outside the home provided some safety in times of emergency. In 1970, 40 percent of U.S. women were in the labor force, mostly part time. By the year 2008, 75 percent of U.S. women were in the labor force, mostly full time. Many women enjoyed the greater autonomy, variation, and creativity that jobs could provide. Many others were forced by economic necessity to work outside of their homes in routinized dead-end jobs with scarce assistance from governmental supports for day care, after-school programs, or elder care.

Women's work outside of the home helped to improve the standard of living for most families, but it did not compensate families for lost white male wages. Women's wage work imposes not only the obvious expenses of additional clothing and transportation, but also the costs of purchasing some of the goods and services that women previously produced at home free of charge, such as cooking, mending, cleaning, shopping, and child care. Those goods and services are crucial. Once they become commodified in the marketplace, they become expensive. The latest figures from Salary.com indicate that if a stay-at-home mother in the United States were replaced by paid domestic products and services, the cost would be \$122,732 a year. The domestic products produced and services rendered by a mom who works outside of the home would cost \$76,184 per year.

Even with women flooding into the labor force, families were still financially hurting. Working women had no time to perform full-time household labor and child care, and there was still not enough money for consumption. More money was accumulating at the top while the

mass of Americans suffered from frozen wages. The wealthy then promoted the credit card to lend to Americans the money that they formerly would have earned in growing wages. Families became dependent on credit card debt. Since the interest rate on credit cards ranges from 15 percent to 25 percent, Americans descended into debt at record-breaking levels.

The living standard of Americans deteriorated psychologically as well. In American culture, women provide most of the emotional labor to make home a warm and comfortable place for men and children. It is women who usually arrange children's social lives and activities, from play dates to dental appointments. Women are usually the directors of adult social life as well. Indeed, women are usually in charge of emotional life for the entire family. The more women work outside of the home without social support in the form of child care programs and domestic help, the more stressed, overworked, and emotionally unavailable they become. Overwhelmed women have less energy for the roles of social director and organizer, as well as emotional and physical caregiver. Households are hurting emotionally. When Bush took office in 2000, he cut many of the already hobbled social programs that allowed families to survive. Families are in trouble.

Women are no longer willing to work outside of the home, do the lion's share of the domestic work, and simultaneously take care of their children's and husbands' physical and emotional needs largely unaided either by their husbands or by social programs. For the first time in American history, the majority of women are abandoning marriage. Women now initiate two-thirds of divorces. Half of first marriages and 60 percent of second marriages end in legal separation or divorce. These impressive figures do not include the many people who end their marriages outside of the legal system.

When men's emotional relationships with women break down, they have little intimate emotional support. Women usually count on other women to emotionally sustain them. Women still manage to befriend and support each other on a personal level in a way that few men can. These changes in households and family life are a third tributary to America's deluge of disaster. Americans have lost both the financial dream of ever-increasing prosperity and consumption, and also the emotional family dream of a stable family connected by a present wife creating emotional connection and domestic order. In short, Americans have lost what was the comfort of home.

4. Americans' Increasing Isolation from One Another

A fourth disaster is closely related. The freeze in U.S. real wages coincided with the beginning of Americans' increasing isolation from one another. Beginning once again in the 1970s, nearly all social connections between Americans declined. The decay in U.S. social life was an almost total phenomenon. It extended from inviting friends to dinner, to joining bridge clubs or bowling leagues, to volunteering for noncontroversial activities such as the PTA or Red Cross blood drives, to participating in more controversial activities such as working for a cause or a political candidate.

There was growth in social participation in evangelical religious groups; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) groups; internet groups; and self-help groups. However, membership in self-help groups, America's greatest social participation growth area, was outnumbered two to one by drop-outs from bowling leagues alone, according to Robert Putnam's 2000 book, *Bowling Alone*, which I have drawn on for statistics throughout this section.

Several inconclusive theories have emerged as to why Americans have dropped out of U.S. social life and civic life.

Women dropping out of social activities because of working full time outside of the home accounts for only 10 percent of the overall dropout rate.

One might attribute U.S. social desertion to the phenomenon of busyness, but that too is an insufficient explanation. The average American watches four hours of television a day, which would be difficult to manage with an intensely busy schedule. The Internet may seem like a replacement for social interaction, but the Internet isolates people as well as connects them.

Extensive television viewing may be a culprit since more people relate to their television sets than to each other, and the heaviest viewing correlates to the least social participation. But surely this is a symptom as much as a cause of the problems that isolate Americans. I say this because extensive television viewing is reported by the viewers themselves as so unsatisfying that it leaves them "not feeling so good." Their descriptions portray it as an addiction that compels without satisfying. An overwhelming number of viewers watch for the purpose of distraction or entertainment. Television functions as an escape from loneliness, changed gender expectations, and looming economic disaster.

Perhaps the greatest reason is that Americans are psychologically and also physically exhausted. They have fewer vacations and longer workweeks than any of their Western European counterparts. Activity in society, including activity in politics, has become a luxury good for those fortunate few who have extra time and energy. The Left's natural constituency, the mass of Americans, is exhausted, disillusioned, and in despair. To add to their despair, the tremendous wealth at the top of society has been used to fund right-wing media outlets like Fox News, to name just one example. Right-wing media promote the idea that there is no alternative to the status quo. At the same time, the skewed distribution of wealth allows vast sums to be given to politicians who advance the fortunes of those who pay their way. Immense wealth is invested in weakening the regulations against enormous giving at the top. These developments increase the conviction that ordinary people make no difference in politics. They have no voice. The force of the Left is further weakened.

5. The Drugging of America

The fifth tributary that helped to create our deluge of disaster is both a cause and an effect of America's social breakdown. This is the numbing

of Americans with psychotropic drugs. In 2006, Americans, who make up approximately 6 percent of the world's population, consumed 66 percent of the world's supply of antidepressants. In 2002, more than 13 percent of Americans were taking Prozac alone. Prozac is one of thirty available antidepressants. Anti-anxiety drugs, such as Zoloft, are so widely prescribed that in the year 2005, the \$3.1 billion sales of Zoloft exceeded the sales for Tide detergent.

Many of these drugs, which are also called "cosmetic drugs" or "life-enhancing drugs," are diagnosed for loneliness, sadness, life transitions, or concentration on task performance. They have been "normalized" through extensive direct-to-consumer advertising and marketing to doctors who are financially rewarded for recommending them to colleagues. Regulations that once restrained the widespread promotion and sales of these powerful drugs have been relaxed to the point of near nonexistence. The United States is the only Western nation that permits direct-to-consumer drug advertising. We are also the only nation without price controls on drugs. Psychiatric drugs are so ubiquitous that the pharmaceutical industry is the most profitable industry in America, and antidepressants are their most profitable products.

What Can We Do?

The current disaster did not just happen with the recent burst of the stock market and housing bubbles. Americans somewhere knew for a long time that we could not pay our credit card bills or our mortgages. Somewhere, unconsciously, we had to know that disaster was approaching. We responded with denial, withdrawal, depression, and dissociation accomplished with the aid of extensive television viewing and preoccupation with scandals and celebrities.

Each of the five tributaries flowed together to drown the mass of Americans in debt, family dissolution, isolation, and drug-induced apathy. In response to the original questions that inspired this article, we now need to ask another question: what can we do about it? Americans may now be looking for change. They elected a president who promised change. That change has not happened. Where else can we look?

Capitalism needs and breeds consumerism. We are surrounded by advertisements for products. Ubiquitous advertising has a blighting side effect. The presentation of all human connection now carries a price tag for a branded product. Scenes of connection with a group of friends include, for example, Budweiser beer. The devoted mother is washing your clothes with Tide. The sexy woman, whom men want and women want to be, seems to come with the sleek Toyota. Ads appear whenever we turn on our computers or read newspapers or magazines. Product placement is present in almost every film. Television, America's mass entertainment, embraces product placement and explicit advertising directed to all ages. Capitalist consumerism conveys the message that relationships happen with and through products. There are too few scenes of people trying honestly to connect and surmount their real economic, social, and emotional problems through honest discussion and negotiation. We need more images of people who enjoy their connection and work through the difficult times involved in creating close, mutual, nurturing relationships. How do we manage to effect change within this environment? Where are the contradictions that create openings?

A Time When Noncommercial Values Are Attractive

One opportunity for change has emerged due to the recent capitalist collapse, which has intensified American suffering. People can no longer afford the brand-name products seen on TV. Their economic woes reveal the relentless hustling of now unaffordable consumer products. They try generics, unknown brands, and less consumption, and often find them just as good. This presents us with an opening to question. New, noncommercial values can form.

Since Americans are hooked on the mass media, and the media loves anything new, the Left can create media-attracting new actions. The anarchist group that formed around a book called *The Coming Insurrection* got full media attention when a well-publicized group jumped on stage at Barnes & Noble in New York for a spontaneous reading that began, "Everyone agrees it's about to explode." The action was widely covered for its novelty.

We can look to the four areas that have grown in the current social drought. They are, in order of their growth, self-help groups, internet groups, evangelical church groups, and GLBT groups.

Self-Help Groups

The largest self-help groups are Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Alcohol and drugs have proved to be a personal and social disaster for millions of Americans, who cannot function on the job and suffer havoc in their personal lives due to these substances. Huge alcohol and pharmaceutical lobbies push these substances on individuals desperate for relief from their problems. The individual solution of self-medicating with drugs and alcohol-promoted so efficiently by capitalism-failed terribly. In the face of that failure, millions join together in small groups where they share their pain and suffering within a supportive, nonjudgmental collective that operates without salaries, advertisements, or financial charges. These twelve-step groups give the Left a window of possibility. We can add a thirteenth step to their twelve-step programs. We can add a step to organize against big pharmaceutical and liquor advertising, which profits on false promises. The Left desperately needs to address people's despair and give them support. We can learn to incorporate nonjudgmental personal and political support, as well as psychological and political dimensions, to Left groups where both nonjudgmental attitudes and psychological support have been sadly lacking. The Left has tried too hard to focus on being correct and not enough effort on reaching people where they are hurting. We need to listen to people without judgment as they do in twelve-step programs.

The GLBT Movement

We can also study the contradictions that helped to produce GLBT organizations. Advertising creates omnipresent images of happiness accessed through products that relate to sexual attractiveness. The sexy woman rides in the man's sleek new car. The virile man drives a big truck and smokes Marlboros. Multibillion-dollar industries such as the diet, cosmetic, and fashion industries promote products to enhance sexual attractiveness. Popular culture celebrates heterosexual coupling and family as ultimate happiness while avoiding mention of collective joys or homosexuality.

The GLBT movement works to include those in their identity group who are excluded from the grand celebration of personal couple happiness built around sexual pairing. The very pressure to channel complex desires into heterosexual coupling helped lead GLBT people to, as a group, articulate collective visions of resistance and envision new possibilities.

Since most families and relationships are breaking down, American people desperately need connection. Organizing creates connection. Collective dreams have a chance to replace the individualistic desires cultivated in capitalist America.

What We Can Learn From Evangelicals' Failures ... and Successes

Conservative evangelical groups create a collective vision and connection while celebrating capitalist success as God's blessing. They provide some of what people desperately need and the Left ignores, such as strong verbal support for important work in the home and a focus on the hard work of child rearing. Conservative evangelicals manage to accomplish this while sex role stereotyping that labor, as well as opposing every form of non-church-based material support that actually allows families to stay afloat. They typically oppose single-payer health plans, Head Start for all, sex education (unless abstinence-based), family planning, maternity and paternity benefits, minimum wage hikes, etc. In the end they cannot deliver the support that families need. The savior they pray to has not saved them from financial and personal desperation and divorce.

Evangelicalism's reduction of morality to personal morality and particularly sexual morality has an embarrassing side effect. Googling "evangelical scandals" results in 3,729,000 hits in five seconds. Evangelical scandals have resulted in reduced credibility. There is now an opportunity for the wider ethical spiritual morality of the community associated with *Tikkun* and left-leaning evangelicals connected to *Sojourners* who develop their social, economic, personal, and political morality, and who see political activity as an expression of morality taken into the world. We on the Left have an opportunity to champion our own moral, ethical, and spiritual vision to Americans who desperately need both morality and hope for a better world. Evangelical promotion of the centrality of personal connection and family gives the Left an opening to advocate material and psychological support for all kinds of families. The Left urgently needs a family program to address the mass breakdown of U.S. homes and families.

The evangelical groups can, ironically show us what we are missing. The failure of evangelical morality, which excludes social, economic, and political morality, may create an opening for a much-needed left-wing program of social, political, economic, and personal ethics and morality for which many hunger.

Internet Organizing

There are explicitly political possibilities afforded by the net. MoveOn.org and other political groups organize and mobilize through the Web. In Iran, members of the opposition evaded censors, communicated with each other, and aroused national and international support through Twitter and Facebook. The Facebook account of Neda Soltani's murder focused Iran and the world on the violent repression of Mousavi's supporters. That possibility exists here.

The four social growth groups springing up in America's desert of political opposition point out possible avenues for a Left that desperately needs direction. Let us return to our original questions:

Why are Americans passive as millions lose their homes, their jobs, their families, and the American dream?

Why do Americans remain at home, disorganized, while their European counterparts flood into the streets in militant, organized protests? How did this happen? What forces are responsible? We can see that the cycles of capitalism with its relentless need for consumer spending and capital accumulation at the top have devastated America. We can also see that unbridled capitalism has created mass suffering and then turned the rage of those who suffer against all who need governmental assistance and against additional scapegoats such as homosexuals, feminists, liberals, socialists, and immigrants. We can create new roads to reclaim this nation by organizing and activating the mass of Americans who know that the ostensible "recovery" will never return what they have lost. We dared to elect a president who championed change verbally, who campaigned on unity and respect for all, and who preserves the structures that destroyed our lives. En masse, we have turned to self-help groups, evangelists, psycho-pharmaceutical drugs, and sexual identity politics, which do not solve the multifaceted crisis in which we are drowning. America needs another way. Perhaps we can provide it?

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