

Burning the Temples. The Collapsing Culture of the American Empire

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Theme: [History](#)

It's more than interesting—it's significant—how various civilizations throughout history have had absolute faith their own primary mode of understanding the world, until catastrophic events caused people to violently destroy the symbols that held their world together, and left it all behind.

In the Indus Valley they walked away from their villages and abandoned their gods.

The tribe centered in Teotihuacan burned their temples before leaving, as did the ancient Egyptians after Pepi II's death.

In each case, a once-dominant culture symbolized its death by rejecting the entities, the gods that unified them, and by burning their shrines.

In our time, the back-to-back sequence of WWI and WWII caused Western culture to burn their unifying mode of understanding the world: rationality and human dignity. As the drifting Indus and wandering Central Americans diffused and dissolved into history, Western culture is right now drifting into history, having abandoned its central unifying world view.

In our day, the temples of the old gods of rationality and of the human spirit—e.g. colleges and universities—like the temples of old, have been set on fire, in this case not literally, but by surrendering internally to a bleak relativism that knows only the rejection of all objective unity expressed by the morally exhausted exhalation of a single word: “resist.” In this deliberate self-impaling on the spike of relativism, the college surrendered to the external forces of neoliberal capitalism as a model for running education, by allowing it to make faculty into mini-administrators, and courses into outcome-based profit units, measured in terms of numbers alone. Just as in primal days, the collapse of cultural unity opens the door to that culture's enemies, especially if that collapsing culture happened to be an empire, as in the case of Teotihuacan, Egypt, and our own U.S. Empire in the West.

So what have we burned? We have squandered a once-prosperous nation built on dual ideals of freedom and equality and turned them both inside out, into their negatives: freedom into the selfishness of “me first” as a virtue, and equality into the dominance me over you, or more obviously, one class over other classes, with the others splintered and siloed into small “identity groups” competing for leftover crumbs falling from the table of the dominant class. The result is increasing internal dissatisfaction between identity groups, and the likelihood of more and more extreme violence from the elite class upon the “identities classes” as a “means of discourse” as the crumbs dry up. The result will finish up the collapse of the bonds that join us as a society and as nations, that we see going on right now.

Not coincidentally, both levels of this collapse involve the rejection of reason of science that demonstrates the reality of the already-occurring climate catastrophe, and the rationality of ethics that holds the primacy of the dignity of each person and notions of responsibility as the primary concerns in any ethical discourse. Both have been replaced by a “discourse of desire,” focused on what we want, whoever the “we” happens to be defined as being.

If it is not yet obvious, here are just a few things that liberal-turned-neoliberal narcissism in conjunction with postmodern relativism have set on fire in the twilight of Western cultural dominance (you can find a detailed analysis of this development in Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*):

- 1) Collapse of international law
- 2) Collapse/U.S. rejection of treaties (e.g. ABM [Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty]; INF [Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty]; JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—nuclear treaty between U.S. and Iran])
- 3) Corporate-bought politicians
- 4) Racism and nationalism abound
- 5) Denial of any authority
- 6) Disenfranchisement of citizens and lack of citizen involvement
- 7) Politicians and political leaders disconnected from the people and in their own “billionaire’s bubble,” making laws only for themselves, and hearing only their billionaire colleagues, doing their own billionaire infighting (e.g. Donald Trump vs. Jeff Bezos, etc.)
- 8) Spying on citizens

But all is not lost, for deep in the recesses of both our individual thinking and our cultural memory, there remain the ideas that once held the promise for a better life for all people, had we simply been true to our words and in our consciences, and had we been more consistent in our actions, that these ideas applied to all people, and had we held our leaders fully and consistently accountable for those values, instead of allowing them to fill their pockets with their fruitless attempts to satiate their intrinsically insatiable greed.

It might behoove us to awaken this memory in and for the young generation which now has to migrate among and away from the ruins of what was once a thriving culture. First of all, we baby boomers owe an apology to the up and coming generation: we have let you down. We have failed you. We have left the planet, the economy, the social situation, and the government all in far worse shape than when we baby boomers took over in the late 1970’s.

The only thing we can do at this point is to try to help you repair the damage we have done. As we do this, we can also leave you some advice from our own past to guide your steps as you try to regain a way to return to the rule of the people, instead of the dictate of the few or a society of splintered groups clamoring for recognition. There are some things you might want to think about if you want to try restoring a functional democracy again.

First of all, realize that the restoration of democracy from the current authoritarian oligarchy

under which we currently live is not going to happen overnight. Nor, unfortunately, is it going to happen under Bernie Sanders. Although he is a good and decent man, he, too, has let you down. He has refused to fight against the party that has fought against him, and he has already made it clear that he will not lead a revolution outside of that party. Another solution will be needed.

Second, realize that without a restoration of the primacy of reason/rationality—i.e. a bedrock belief in the innate ability of people take in information for themselves, to sort it out, to think independently, to discourse freely and openly (and that means with accountability, and not hiding behind electronic anonymity), and thus to make their own informed choices—a people's democracy won't even get off the ground.

Third, renew a commitment to the intrinsic dignity of all life—maybe even humans first, if we need to start somewhere—but to all life on the planet. This will help recalibrate a new ethical compass that will not misguide you. Given that renewed presupposition, here is what it can bring:

- 1) Equality of all, based on the recognition of the inherent dignity of all;
- 2) Freedom of all, not to fulfill individual desires nor narcissistic greed, but to live out a life of being the kind of person with the kind of creative character and career they choose;
- 3) Therefore, human rights can become important again;
- 4) Democratic ideals of citizenship
- 5) An end to the “me first” or “us first” and “you last” mentality that is currently dividing us
- 6) A return to the rule of law between government and its people and between governments and governments in the world order, to say nothing of laws of war when it occurs.

It is never too late to start to renew democracy, since democracy lives in the hearts of people, not in the halls of governments. We just need to remember that maxim, keep that fire burning, and get to work to reclaim what is rightfully ours, and not the oligarchs: our own rule!

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