

Perils of Decadence

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ABSTRACT

Post-industrial society and liberal democracies are plagued by their own contradictions and conflicts. Cultural decadence is not confined to developing nations. Rise of global inequality, authoritarianism, violence, and terror mark the evil profligacy of the new bourgeois class. A brief requiem for liberalism and democracy seems in order.

Keywords: New Leviathan; Mayhem and Gun Violence; Global Inequality; Freedom and Oppression

Tumbling into January 2023 has not been easy. Americans have hardly overcome the horrors of last January's insurrection and mob violence on the Capitol. A six-year-old boy shot his first-grade teacher in Newport News, Virginia (January 6, 2023). A year ago, the 45th President of the United States assumed an impresario role to unleash a violent attack on the Capitol (January 6, 2022). These two actors of chaos represent an unmitigated crisis of 'human' and 'social' development which impacts life, liberty, and freedom. A *New Leviathan* has replaced Thomas Hobbes' old *Leviathan*. Robert Ross writes:

"The characteristic terror of the Old Leviathan was the police power of the state. The characteristic terror of the New Leviathan is unemployment, wage cuts, the fear that family or community's aspirations for environmental or economic improvement may cause the agents of the New Leviathan to take their investments to some other place where working people are more vulnerable to the

demands of their employers." (1990: 3 quoted by Renton, 2001: 7)

The evolution of this new monster represents the failure of both society and culture, men and women, rulers and the ruled. Children, workers, and employees are increasingly vulnerable to stunted developmental processes which dehumanize the innocent and nourish the predator. The visible indices of techno-advancements and consumerism disguise this predatory process at the expense of social progress which is muffled and thwarted by lack of civility in modern society.

The atavistic character of the *New Leviathan* is markedly different than what Robert Ross had diagnosed. The macro-transformation of humans is a function and indicator of a failed society governed by dysfunctional institutions. A six-year-old kid shoots his teacher; a President of the world's most advanced democracy unleashed the reins of terror at the altar of his narcissistic ego and insatiable lust for power and greed.

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Global humanity is still going through a pandemic which has killed more than a million people in the world. There is a subtle paradigm shift in human experience and societal governance. I make a modest attempt to unravel both paradox and paralysis of modern society. Insurrections have occurred in history. This one unleashed by white supremacists under the leadership of Donald Trump was quite different.

Digital, information revolution ironically facilitated a climate of falsehood and conspiracy theories. Denial of reality—rejecting outcome of a national election—became the new normal which legitimized both criminality and bigotry in the world’s most advanced democracy. Covid 19, its variants in their 4th year of global threats, further empower the state’s power to misgovern populace. A recent National Report reveals 330% rise of hate and violence against Asian Americans during 2021 and 2022².

A disturbing clue to the prejudiced minds which generate carnage and mayhem is a convenient belief that Chinese people caused Covid 19). The *New Leviathan* is a wolf child of misplaced anger, resentment, and myopic perspective on human life and happiness.

The issues and aspects analyzed here embody the soul and soullessness of forces that perpetrate against humanity. The rise capitalist prosperity at the expense of massive deprivation and alienation of the common man is a disturbing reality. This *paradoxical development* is more than dysfunctional: It’s rooted in poisonous systemic barriers against consciousness; it nurtures a delusional death-wish; and it retards progress. Rampant political violence, endemic economic inequality, and pervasive social injustice are faces of this phenomenon.

Tara Zahra, in her new book *Against the World* (2022) writes about Trumpian times followed by a myriad of things—from Pandemic to Ukraine—that challenge global comity. New barriers tend to deglobalize social movement, international trade and interactions that made a widely diverse world ‘smaller.’ The utopian dream of a borderless world has morphed into a Hobbesian dystopia which has gated communities, national walls, and cultural barricades which define new caste systems inclusive of racial hierarchies and class structures.

²“Two Years and Thousands of Voices What Community-Generated Data Tells Us About Anti-AAPI Hate”; <https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Year-2-Report.pdf>; retrieved January 22, 2023

Graeme Wood contends, “The mayhem is not about you” On the Chinese Lunar Year of the Rabbit, January 21, 2023, Huu Can Tran, a 72-year-old shot and killed 11 people in a Dancing Hall in Monterey Park, California. On the heels of this mayhem, two days later 66-year-old Chunli Zhao shot 7 people dead in Half Moon Bay near San Francisco, California. The “motiveless malignity” of these shootings—noting the place, age and ethnicity of both victims and killers—calls for introspective reckoning to mitigate this unrecognized insanity of our culture. Alienation of the aged in one’s own community fraught with generational hiatus muffles intra-familial-communal communications which warrants analysis before branding this malignity as a mental health issue.

Social Sciences muddled through dualism of objective and subjective tracks narrowly simplifying mitigating conditions. Racism, sexism, ageism and discrimination against LGBT groups usually define contours of the human condition. The invincibility of corporate power, what I call ‘corporate despotism,’ is the most oppressive force that bedevils humanity. Public policy, new bourgeoisie, and mental health industry reinforces this profligacy which retards progress.

What makes people to kill each other? Is it “war of all against each other”? Or something structurally ingrained in the environment that transforms the ‘social animal’ into a ‘feral beast’? Conceptions of human telos and nature interact with each other depending on one’s ideological predilection. The net result is profligacy and evil thrive at the expense of tranquility, progress, and hope.

Politics, ethics, and power have often been in the minds of great thinkers: Aristotle, Descartes, Rousseau, Kant, Nietzsche, and Marx have significantly shaped Western philosophy in the classic and modern traditions. The contemporary galaxy of philosophers often follow various strands that follow premodern and modern thoughts.

Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* emphasized the final ‘purpose’ (end; function; nature) of humans which determines *ethics*. ‘Virtue’ and ‘excellence’ are seen within a *cosmos* as human reality. Rousseau, Descartes, Kant, and Nietzsche may be called revolutionary modernists who signify the essence of human experience as the primary focus of universal existence. The trajectory of individualism, liberalism, socialism, and totalitarianism springs from this evolutionary passage.

In contemporary cultures worldwide, we encounter a mix of these trends that determine liberal and autocratic

forms of democratic and republican structures. There is no purity in these systems of governance. Fragility of American democracy is best demonstrated by Donald Trump's diabolical role in his attempt to destroy world's oldest constitutional democracy. People in power—Narendra Modi, V. Putin, Xi Jinping etcetera—tend to weaponize their own agendas than serve public interest. Majoritarian support and authoritarian clout devoid of *ethics* do not legitimize power. Perhaps Kantian 'moral' imperative is essential to understand this immoral world.

"I think, therefore I am" (*Descartes*). "There are no facts, all interpretations" (*Nietzsche*). "The history of all hitherto society is the history of class struggle" (*Marx*). "Existence precedes essence" (*Sartre*). These are a few iconic gems in the transformative history of thought. Rousseau was perhaps the first thinker who defined "social". This was a threshold, a dawn, a primordial *paradigm shift* in the entire history of social and political thought that challenged the age-old classic orthodoxies. When Mohandas K. Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see in this world," he challenged the modern civilization to assume responsibility for its own actions. Much of cultural morass today is an outcome of this counter-praxis manifested by populist liberalism, hideous individualism, and predatory capitalism. Socialism has already devoured its own children. Look at Russia and China. Classic, premodern thought—unifying telos and nature—have been wrong. Patrick Deneen has a point: Progressive liberalism accepts telos, but it's not in nature:

"To realize this potential, human beings need to be freed, not as economic animals, but as social animals. We need to be freed from constraints in the social sphere, the kind of informal constraints that limit our ability to become the creatures that we can become through this development" (2023: 25)

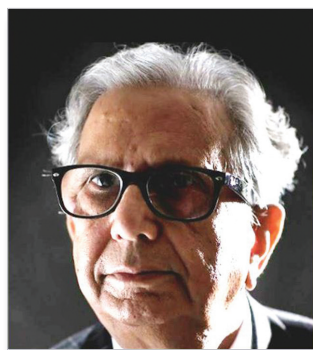
The dialectic of freedom and oppression offers a developmentally optimistic view of the human condition. Much of my oeuvre is inspired by and dedicated to this idea (Mohan, 1986; 1993; 2022).

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Biographical Statement of Author

Brij Mohan, Dean Emeritus and Professor of Social Work, Louisiana State University, USA, is an internationally renowned Scholar with expertise in social philosophy, social welfare, public policy and international social development.



He is the author of 24 books and over 400 articles, papers, and reviews. His most recent books include: *Development, Poverty of Culture and Social Policy* (Palgrave, 2011), *Climate, Economy and Justice* (Palgrave, 2015), *The Future of Social Work* (Sage, 2018) and *Social Policy on the Cusp* (Nova, 2020). Mahatma Gandhi Kashi

Vidyapith honored him with a Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*) and the National Association of Professional Social Workers in India awarded him the *Life-Time Achievement Award*.

Currently, he is working on two new books, including his memoirs.

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