

## **Why Americans Are a Broken People?**

by Bruce E. Levine via quill - *Alternet Monday, Dec 14 2009, 6:58pm*

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### **Truth, laced with Abuse, destroys the spirit and enslaves**

Can people become so broken that truths of how they are being screwed do not "set them free" but instead further demoralize them? Has such a demoralization happened in the United States?

Do totalitarian regimes actually want us to hear how we have been screwed because they know that humiliating passivity in the face of obvious oppression will demoralize us even further?

What forces have created a demoralized, passive, dis-couraged U.S. population?

Can anything be done to turn this around?

### **Can people become so broken and demoralized that truths of how they are being screwed enslave them rather than "set them free?"**

Yes. It is called the "abuse syndrome." How do abusive pimps, spouses, bosses, corporations, and governments stay in control? They shove lies, emotional and physical abuses, and injustices in their victims' faces, and when victims are afraid to exit from these relationships, they get weaker. Abusers then make their victims eat even more lies, abuses, and injustices, resulting in victims becoming even weaker in these negative relationships.

### **Does conscious awareness of abusive behavior 'set victims free' or further exacerbate abusive syndromes and apathy?**

No. For victims of abuse syndromes, the truth of their passive submission to humiliating oppression is more than embarrassing; it can feel shameful -- and there is nothing more painful than shame. When one already feels beaten down and demoralized, the likely response to the pain of shame is not constructive action, but more attempts to shut down (DENY) or divert oneself from this pain. It is not likely that the truth of one's humiliating oppression is going to energize one to constructive actions.

### **Has such a demoralization happened in the U.S.?**

In the United States, 47 million people are without health insurance, and many millions more are underinsured or a job layoff away from losing their coverage. But despite the current sellout by their elected officials to the insurance industry, there is no outpouring of millions of U.S. citizens on the streets of Washington, D.C., protesting this betrayal.

Polls show that the majority of Americans oppose U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the taxpayer bailout of the financial industry, yet only a handful of U.S. citizens have protested these circumstances.

Remember the 2000 U.S. presidential election? That's the one in which Al Gore received 500,000 more votes than George W. Bush. That's also the one that the Florida Supreme Court's order for a

recount of the disputed Florida vote was overruled by the U.S. Supreme Court in a politicized 5-4 decision, of which dissenting Justice John Paul Stevens remarked: "Although we may never know with complete certainty the identity of the winner of this year's presidential election, the identity of the loser is perfectly clear. It is the nation's confidence in the judge as an impartial guardian of the rule of law." Yet, even this provoked few demonstrators.

When people are broken, they cannot act on truths of injustice. Furthermore, when people have become broken, more truths about how they have been victimized can lead to shame about how they have allowed it. And shame, like fear, is one more way we become even more psychologically demoralized and 'broken.'

U.S. citizens do not actively protest obvious injustices for the same reasons that people cannot leave their abusive spouses: They feel helpless to effect change. The more we don't act, the weaker we get. And ultimately to deal with the painful humiliation over inaction in the face of an oppressor, we move to shut-down/denial mode and use escape strategies such as depression, substance abuse, and other diversions, which further keep us from acting. This is the vicious cycle of all abuse syndromes.

**Do some totalitarians actually want us to hear how we have been screwed because they know that humiliating passivity in the face of obvious oppression will demoralize us even further?**

Maybe.

Shortly before the 2000 U.S. presidential election, millions of Americans saw a clip of George W. Bush joking to a wealthy group of people, "What a crowd tonight: the haves and the haves-more. Some people call you the elite; I call you my base." Yet, even with these kind of inflammatory remarks, the tens of millions of U.S. citizens who had come to despise Bush and his arrogance remained passive in the face of the 2000 non-democratic presidential elections.

Perhaps the "political genius" of the Bush-Cheney regime was in their full realization that Americans were so broken that the regime could get away with damn near anything. And the more people did nothing about the boot stomping on their faces, the weaker people became.

**What forces have created a demoralized, passive, dis-couraged U.S. population?**

The U.S. government-corporate partnership has used its share of guns and terror to break Native Americans, labor union organizers, and other dissidents and activists. But today, most U.S. citizens are broken by financial fears or debt slavery. There is potential legal debt if we speak out against a powerful authority, and all kinds of other debt if we do not comply on the job. Young people are broken by college-loan debts and fear of having no health insurance.

The U.S. population is increasingly broken by the alienation created by corporate-governmental policies. A 2006 American Sociological Review study ("Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades") reported that, in 2004, 25 percent of Americans did not have a single confidant. (In 1985, 10 percent of Americans reported not having a single confidant.) Sociologist Robert Putnam, in his 2000 book, *Bowling Alone*, describes how social connectedness is disappearing in virtually every aspect of U.S. life. For example, there has been a significant decrease in face-to-face contact with neighbors and friends due to suburbanization, commuting, electronic entertainment, time and money pressures and other variables created by governmental-corporate policies. And union activities and other formal or informal ways that people give each other the support necessary to resist oppression have also decreased.

We are so broken by corporate government that most of us have been rendered completely passive -- even when faced with critical issues such as failing food supplies and environmental crises we remain paralyzed victims. And we, like many other people in the world, are broken by socializing institutions that alienate us from our basic humanity. A few examples:

Schools and Universities: Do most schools teach young people to be action-oriented -- or to be passive? Do most schools teach young people that they can affect their surroundings -- or not to bother? Do schools provide examples of democratic institutions -- or examples of authoritarian ones?

A long list of school critics from Henry David Thoreau to John Dewey, John Holt, Paul Goodman, Jonathan Kozol, Alfie Kohn, Ivan Illich, and John Taylor Gatto have pointed out that a school is nothing less than a miniature society: what young people experience in schools is the chief means of creating our future society. Schools are routinely places where kids -- through fear -- learn to comply to authorities for whom they often have no respect, and to regurgitate material they often find meaningless. These are great ways of breaking someone.

Today, U.S. colleges and universities have increasingly become places where young people are merely acquiring degree credentials -- badges of compliance for corporate employers -- in exchange for learning to accept bureaucratic domination and enslaving debt.

Mental Health Institutions: Aldous Huxley predicted today's pharmaceutical societyl "[I]t seems to me perfectly in the cards," he said, "that there will be within the next generation or so a pharmacological method of making people love their servitude."

Today, increasing numbers of people in the U.S. who do not comply with authority are being diagnosed with mental illnesses and medicated with psychiatric drugs that make them less pained about their boredom, resentments, and other negative emotions, thus rendering them more compliant and manageable.

Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) is an increasingly popular diagnosis for children and teenagers. The official symptoms of ODD include, "often actively defies or refuses to comply with adult requests or rules," and "often argues with adults." An even more common reaction to oppressive authorities than the overt defiance of ODD is some type of passive defiance -- for example, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Studies show that virtually all children diagnosed with ADHD will pay attention to activities that they actually enjoy or that they have chosen. In other words, when ADHD-labeled kids are having a good time and in control, the "disease" goes away.

When human beings feel too terrified and broken to actively protest, they may stage a "passive-aggressive revolution" by simply getting depressed, staying drunk, and not doing anything -- this is one reason why the Soviet empire crumbled. However, the diseasing/medicalizing of rebellion and drug "treatments" have weakened the power of even this passive-aggressive revolution.

Television: In his book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (1978), Jerry Mander (after reviewing totalitarian critics such as George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Jacques Ellul, and Ivan Illich) compiled a list of the "Eight Ideal Conditions for the Flowering of Autocracy."

Mander claimed that television helps create all eight conditions for breaking a population. Television, he explained, (1) occupies people so that they don't know themselves -- and what a human being is; (2) separates people from one another; (3) creates sensory deprivation; (4) occupies the mind and fills the brain with prearranged experience and thought; (5) encourages drug use to dampen dissatisfaction (while TV itself produces a drug-like effect, this was compounded in 1997 the

U.S. Food and Drug Administration relaxing the rules of prescription-drug advertising); (6) centralizes knowledge and information; (7) eliminates or "museumize" other cultures to eliminate comparisons; and (8) redefines happiness and the meaning of life.

Commericalism of Damn Near Everything: While spirituality, music, and cinema can be revolutionary forces, the gross commercialization of all of these has deadened their capacity to energize rebellion. So now, damn near everything -- not just organized religion -- has become "opiates of the masses."

The primary societal role of U.S. citizens is no longer that of "citizen" but that of "consumer." While citizens know that buying and selling within community strengthens that community and that this strengthens democracy, consumers care only about the best deal. While citizens understand that dependency on an impersonal creditor is a kind of slavery, consumers get excited with credit cards that offer a temporarily low APR.

Consumerism breaks people by devaluing human connectedness, socializing self-absorption, obliterating self-reliance, alienating people from normal human emotional reactions, and by selling the idea that purchased products -- not themselves and their community -- are their salvation.

### **Can anything be done to turn this around?**

When people get caught up in humiliating abuse syndromes, more truths about their oppressive humiliations don't set them free. What sets them free is morale.

What gives people morale? Encouragement. Small victories. Models of courageous behaviors. And anything that helps them break out of the vicious cycle of pain, shut down, immobilization, shame over immobilization, more pain, and more shut down.

The last people I would turn to for help in remobilizing a demoralized population are mental health professionals -- at least those who have not rebelled against their professional socialization. Much of the craft of relighting the pilot light requires talents that mental health professionals simply are not selected for nor are they trained in. Specifically, the talents required are a fearlessness around image, spontaneity, and definitely anti-authoritarianism. But these are not the traits that medical schools or graduate schools select for or encourage.

Mental health professionals' focus on symptoms and feelings often create patients who take themselves and their moods far too seriously. In contrast, people talented in the craft of maintaining morale resist this kind of self-absorption. For example, in the question-and-answer session that followed a Noam Chomsky talk (reported in *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky*, 2002), a somewhat demoralized man in the audience asked Chomsky if he too ever went through a phase of hopelessness. Chomsky responded, "Yeah, every evening . . ."

If you want to feel hopeless, there are a lot of things you could feel hopeless about. If you want to sort of work out objectively what's the chance that the human species will survive for another century, probably not very high. But I mean, what's the point? . . . First of all, those predictions don't mean anything -- they're more just a reflection of your mood or your personality than anything else. And if you act on that assumption, then you're guaranteeing that'll happen. If you act on the assumption that things can change, well, maybe they will. Okay, the only rational choice, given those alternatives, is to forget pessimism."

A major component of the craft of maintaining morale is not taking the advertised reality too

seriously. In the early 1960s, when the overwhelming majority in the U.S. supported military intervention in Vietnam, Chomsky was one of a minority of U.S. citizens actively opposing it. Looking back at this era, Chomsky reflected, "When I got involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement, it seemed to me impossible that we would ever have any effect. . . So looking back, I think my evaluation of the 'hope' was much too pessimistic: it was based on a complete misunderstanding. I was sort of believing what I read."

An elitist assumption is that people don't change because they are either ignorant of their problems or ignorant of solutions. Elitist "helpers" think they have done something useful by informing overweight people that they are obese and that they must reduce their caloric intake and increase exercise. An elitist who has never been broken by his or her circumstances does not know that people who have become demoralized do not need analyses and pontifications. Rather the immobilized need a shot of morale.

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