Empire of Egotism: An Educational and Phenomenological Perspective from Dayton's Quadruple Crises

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Abstract

Dayton, Ohio presents a holographic image of American empire in the 21st century. Over the past decade, the city and its environs have suffered quadruple crises of economic decline, opioid addiction, mass violence, and climate-fueled natural disaster. This essay illustrates these crises phenomenologically as symptoms arising from our collective egotism. Viewed through the framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the wounded ego of the bourgeois subject engages in forms of empire-sustaining violence—namely militarism, racism, consumerism, and revanchist politics—that commonly revisit themselves upon us as 'blowback'. Historically and currently, schooling and education serve as arenas for both reproducing and challenging American empire and egotism. Broadly considered, education offers a lens through which to expose, inoculate, and organize against the existential crises facing the city and the nation.

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Dayton, Ohio presents a holographic image of American empire in the 21st century. Over the past decade, the city and its environs have suffered quadruple crises of economic decline, opioid addiction, mass violence, and climate-fueled natural disaster. Following the Great Recession of 2008, the losses of National Cash Register's world headquarters and the General Motors Moraine assembly plant punctuated Dayton's decades-long economic decline. Situated proximately to 'the crossroads of America,' the I-70/I-75 highway interchange that connects supply routes from the northern, southern, eastern, and western-most parts of the country, Dayton has been an epicenter of the national opioid epidemic. Already reeling from these tragedies, a tornado outbreak struck the area in the summer of 2019, displacing thousands (Stewart, 2019). During that same summer, a mass shooter claimed nine lives in the Oregon District, Dayton's nightlife and cultural hub. This essay illustrates these crises phenomenologically as symptoms arising from our collective egotism. Viewed through the framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the wounded ego of the bourgeois subject engages in forms of empire-sustaining violence—namely militarism, racism, consumerism, and revanchist politics—that return to us as 'blowback'.

Host to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Dayton's aerospace and military industries buoy the Ohio River Valley economy. However, violence inflicted overseas—bombing raids, drone strikes, targeted assassinations, and the like—revisit themselves upon the homeland. War, wrote Randolph Bourne, "means not only the actual and potential destruction of the enemy, but of the nation at home as well…If the State's chief function is war, then the State must suck out of the nation a large part of its energy for its purely sterile purposes of defense and aggression. It devotes to waste or to actual destruction as much as it can of the vitality of the nation" (Bourne, September, 1917; 1918). Bombs dropped on Vietnam, warned Martin Luther King, Jr. (1967) , exploded in our own neighborhoods and destroyed the possibilities for a decent America. Maintenance of empire in the 21st century requires the state to compensate for its mal-allocation of recourses by intensifying domestic warfare against its poor and working classes through revanchist policies such as austerity, privatization, public debt, and mass incarceration, which punish those most severely victimized by the vagaries of global, neoliberal

capitalism.

Historically and currently, schooling and education serve as arenas for both reproducing and challenging American empire and egotism. Substantially through its capture of the schooling agenda, the imperial agenda breeds addiction, racism, revanchist violence, and ecocide. Education, broadly considered, can respond to these maladies by offering a lens through which to see more effectively who we are and imagine more intensively who we might yet become.

Blowback: Neoliberal Capitalism and Revanchist Violence

Chalmers Johnson's *Nemesis* (2008) evoked the Greek goddess of vengeance, punisher of hubris and arrogance. Nemesis visited the United States on September 11, 2001, wrote Johnson, as retaliation for its aggression in Afghanistan. Unaware of this aggression and the animosity that it generated, the World Trade Center attacks flummoxed most Americans who thus supported the blind, retaliatory lashing out of the Iraq War. Terrorist retribution, referred to as 'blowback' in C.I.A. terminology, has followed America's overseas involvement in the overthrow of governments, rigging of elections, and massacres of civilians. The clandestine actions that precipitate blowback are indispensable to empire, argued Johnson, but lethal to democracy insofar as they rely upon secretive policy, disregard for popular will, and class warfare as means of neutralizing the domestic unrest that arises in response to the mal-allocation of resources—surfeit military spending off-set by austerity, privatization, public debt, etc.—required to maintain global hegemony. Dayton's quadruple crises appear to be episodes of 'blowback', consequences of the imperial and egotistical ideology ever operating at the margins of our conscious awareness.

Were extraterrestrials to survey Earthly geopolitics, they would likely note the exceptional role of the United States military and armaments industry. With a $740.5 billion budget proposed for fiscal year 2021, the U.S. armed forces maintain more than 800 bases around the globe, in more than 40 countries and overseas territories (Davidson & Restuccia, 2020; United States Department of Defense, 2019). Upwards of 100 nations deploy American armaments against enemies foreign and domestic (Johnson, 2008). Above and beyond all others, it is this industry that sustains Dayton's wealth. Alone, Wright-

Patterson Air Force Base employs 27,000 enlisted and civilian workers in the region. Military contractors including General Electric, Honeywell, Boeing, and Airbus locally employ similar numbers. Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and BAE Systems each contribute millions to armaments research and development conducted in and around Dayton (Salomone, 2017).

On the other side of the city tracks, economic decline began decades ago as a result of deindustrialization and accelerated dramatically following the Great Recession of 2008, when National Cash Register took thousands of middle-class jobs from the area. Four years later, General Motors abandoned its assembly plant nearby in Moraine, pulling the proverbial chair out from under thousands of workers abruptly estranged from their American Dream (*The Last Truck,* 2009). Researchers at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania and the Massachusetts General Hospital recently published findings that opioid deaths have nearly doubled in counties where automotive assembly plants closed. Such economic losses, the report's authors declared, can have a profound effect on a person's mental well-being (Karlis, 2019). Job loss frequently leads to loss of health insurance and produces feelings of isolation, loneliness, and depression (Khazan, 2020). This damage reverberates generationally to reduce graduation rates and public health measures among the children and grandchildren of the dispossessed (*In the Age of A.I.*, 2019).

The re-shaping of Dayton's economy in the neoliberal era has amplified its inequality, most grotesquely evident in child-family welfare and the provision of education. While neighboring suburban districts attract families of means, Dayton Public Schools (DPS) consistently rank among the very worst in Ohio (Dayton Public Schools, 2019). DPS students bring with them forms of stress and trauma—hunger, violence, and insecurity—common to communities ravaged by poverty and racial segregation. Going above and beyond their official duties, DPS teachers frequently prepare weekend and holiday meal kits, at their own expense, for the many students who rely upon the school as their primary source of nutrition. These boys and girls suffer the 'collateral damage' of an imperial budget that has cast a full half of the nation's youth below the official thresholds for poverty and near-poverty (Homelessness, 2020;

Layton, 2015).

Over centuries, chattel and wage slaves have built the American empire, with the most dangerous and grueling work falling to African-Americans, Latino-Americans, and other racialized immigrant groups such as the Irish and Italians (Ware, 1964). These groups have historically borne the brunt of falling economic tides and the violent reactions of white supremacists fearing diminution of their privilege. This heritage of racist violence, today re-animated across the globe, is symptomatic of the egotism that constitutes the bourgeois subject.

According to Jacques Lacan (2006), the bourgeois self forms during the psychoanalytic 'mirror stage', when the child first recognizes its image in a mirror. Whereas this image appears as an autonomous and unified whole, the child nonetheless experiences itself as dependent and incomplete. Although yearning to do so, the child remains unable to consummate its holistic image. Experiencing the gap between the fragmented self and the holistic mirror image as a form of 'dismemberment' or 'castration', the ego develops as protective armor (Johnston, 2018; Lacan, 2006).

Centralized in the thalamus and cerebellum, the ego mediates emotion, maintains boundaries between self and other, and negotiates hierarchies of command and obedience, submission and domination. From the perspective of evolutionary biology, the ego extends the organism's bio-survival unit beyond the mother figure to the larger nexus of tribe or nation-state. Whereas the feudal political economy linked the peasant's bio-survival to his or her lord, the capitalist political economy links the worker's bio-survival to an employer wielding control over access to food, shelter, medical care, and all other things that money affords (Falk, 2018; Wilson, 2005).

Although the Enlightenment nominally invested modern persons with liberty, Slavoj Zizek (1989) held that the wage contract effectively nullifies this. Bourgeois subjects are not truly sovereign, argued Zizek, because they are simultaneously subservient to the desires of their egos and the commands of their employers. Psychologically castrated by the wage contract, the ego's energies are channeled into Sisyphean efforts to salve the wound through consumption. Thus the symbolic violence of the bourgeois

subject—consumerist psychopathology—contributes to the all too real violence of the Anthropocene (Falk, 2020).

For Lacan, the psychological violence of the mirror stage haunts bourgeois subjectivity writ large. Relating to one another as ego to ego, we become not agents capable of self-determination but rather inauthentic beings, or herd animals, who unconsciously follow directives from 'the big other' (Johnston, 2018; Falk, 2020). Prior to the Progressive Era dawn of consumerist ideology, and perennially throughout their history, Americans have fortified their egos with the desserts of white supremacy. Pleasure in the suffering of people deemed Other has traditionally served as a source of communal *jouissance*—a surplus enjoyment, or *plus-de-jour*, that exceeds mere pleasure and entails pain or death—among those threatened by political and economic forces beyond their ken. While salving the wounded ego, transgressive acts of racial violence have functioned to divide and conquer the poor and working classes.

Revanchism, wrote Neil Smith (1996), is a politics of reactionary vengeance against the poor and marginalized. Underlying many racist ideologies, revanchism refers to an obsession with the obscene pleasures of despised groups (Proudfood, 2019). "Racism," wrote Jacque-Alain Miller (1994), "is founded on what one imagines about the Other's *jouissance*…Racist stories are always about the way in which the Other obtains a *plus-de-jour*…he is always endowed with a part of *jouissance* that he does not deserve. Thus true intolerance is the intolerance of the Other's *jouissance*.".

Revanchism can be traced to the development of the white working class during the Industrial Revolution, which ushered a dramatic transition in Americans' lifeways. Industrialization entailed the separation of work from home, internalization of factory discipline, elimination of holidays, and bridling of sexuality. As Americans embraced their new identity and work ethic, they both longed for and despised those recently lost. Nostalgic visions of this former way of life appeared prominently in blackface minstrel shows, whose characters projected pre-capitalist values and behaviors onto Blacks (Falk, in press; Saxton, 1990). Racism, wrote George Rawick in *From Sunup to Sundown* (1972), was connected to a loss of humanity suffered in the transition to industrial capitalism. Lynching, as Amy Louise Wood

(2009, p. 49) described, "acted as more than a form of political terror that restored white dominance against the threat of black equality.". It became a "divinely sanctioned retribution for black 'sin' that threatened not only white authority but white purity and virtue."

Revanchist policies typically take aim at workers, mothers receiving welfare, immigrants, gays, the homeless, racial minorities, protesters, etc., who are seen to be stealing enjoyment from 'decent', 'honest', and 'hard-working' folks. Today's politics of rage are substantially fueled by a sense of thwarted expectations and stolen enjoyments, principally among traditionally dominant groups—whites, men, Christians—who see their status and way of life assaulted not by global capitalism, but rather by feminists, racial minorities, homosexuals, Muslims, Jews, liberals, and other hated groups (Anderson, 2016). Trump rallies, observed Jamelle Bouie (2019), evoke the imagery and emotion of public lynchings from a century ago. Just as the photographs of these lynchings depicted the smiling, gleeful faces of white men in the crowds "who took immense pleasure in the utter cruelty of torturing others to death," so we see the same expressions in response to the President's misogyny, race-baiting, and policies of ethnically cleansing black and brown people (Serwer, 2018). These egotistical pathologies similarly undergird the crises of mass violence and opioid addiction.

The Oregon District Massacre and the Militarization of School & Society

Revanchist obsession with the *jouissance* of the Other appears to fuel the tragedy of mass shootings. On August 4, 2019, Connor Betts, a 24-year-old Ohio man, killed nine—including his own transgender sibling—and wounded dozens more in the Oregon District, the hub of Dayton's nightlife. According to Jesse Proudfoot (2019, pp. 220-221), neighborhoods such as the Oregon District "function as places where transgressive enjoyments such as sex and illicit drug use can be located, both psychically and materially.". A deeply sad and lonely, socially and sexually frustrated young man, Betts targeted the social scene from whose pleasures and enjoyments he had felt excluded. Following the tragedy, Candice Keller, a state Representative from Middletown, Ohio, took to Twitter to blame the massacre on gays, drag queens, immigrants, and marijuana (Wartman & Balmert, 2019). Keller charged that were it not for

the obscene perversions of the Oregon District revelers, which stole from the enjoyment to which 'good and decent' folk are rightfully entitled, there would have been no cause for so violent an outburst.

The Oregon District Massacre highlights recurrent themes among the specter of mass shootings. In a preponderance of cases, the assailants lash out at people and institutions perceived to have denied them the *jouissance* to which they are rightfully entitled. In so doing, these perpetrators betray a profound egotism, which recent neuroscientific research demonstrates to be a common link among the various psycho-spiritual disorders—depression, anxiety, addiction, and suicidality—that afflict most mass shooters (Peterson & Densley, 2019; Raney & Gold, 2019; Shuffleton, 2015; Warnick, Kim & Robinson, 2015).

Warnick, Kim, and Robinson (2015) called attention to concurrence between the rise of mass shootings and the militarization of society. School shootings, they conclude, arose contemporaneously with zero tolerance policies, security cameras, police presence, locker and strip searches, high stakes testing, regimentation of curricula, and erosion of academic freedom. Although millions of children lacking proper nutrition and healthcare attend public schools deprived of resources for transportation, heating, clean water, libraries, adequate instructional equipment, full-time nurses and guidance counselors, and well-trained and experienced teachers, the Trump administration has recently proposed spending one billion dollars to provide weaponry and firearms training to teachers and staff in every United States school district (Heim, 2018).

These policy and budget priorities reflect the same societal trend that Radley Balko illustrates in *Rise of the Warrior Cop* (2013). Equipped with the discarded paraphernalia from two ongoing decades of imperial warfare, urban police departments now confront American citizens with weaponry long-familiar to Latin American peasants and Middle Eastern villagers (Tanks & AR-15's, 2020). As the American empire declines, it relies more heavily upon overt violence to keep its increasingly desperate and unruly domestic population in line. The spear tip of empire extends from the mountains of Afghanistan to the streets of Charlottesville, the schools and hospitals of Yemen to the fields of Standing Rock. Although the

egotistical infrastructure of American society imposes a myopic perspective upon the realities of suffering under empire, twenty-first century insights into indigenous phenomenology further illuminate the common roots of Dayton's quadruple crises.

Opioid Addiction: A Phenomenological Perspective

America's opioid crisis is sufficiently ubiquitous that few remain untouched. Opioids claim nearly 130 lives per day in the U.S. and 47,000 annually. An additional 1.7 million are battling opioid use disorder (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2019). Opioids are particularly powerful and prone to addiction because they hook onto receptors in the brain stem, the oldest, deepest, and most powerful circuitry of the human mind-brain. The heroin high mimics the somatic sense of comfort and satiety that infants feel while suckling their mothers (Wilson, 2005). Prevalent within the literature on opioid addiction is the addict's overwhelming sense of shame and isolation. Chronic loneliness floods the neocortex with cortisol in a way that mirrors a stone-fisted punch to the face, stimulating panicked hyper-vigilance and driving addicts back into the arms of their habitual salve (National Public Radio, 2019). Plagued by revanchist ideology, public policies intended to mitigate the crisis have largely failed (Proudfoot, 2019).

Revanchism is baked into the cultural history of America's War on Drugs. As early as the 16th century, the Catholic Church outlawed the Mayan mushroom cults as direct competitors to its own holy sacrament. "They called these mushrooms *teunamacatlh* in their language," reported Motolinia, a Franciscan friar working in Mexico, "which means 'flesh of God,' or of the Devil that they worshipped" (quoted in Ott, 1996, p. 277). In the early 20th century, combinations of labor unrest and racial animus against Chinese, Mexican, and African Americans drove criminalization of opium, marijuana, and crack cocaine (Helmer & Vietorisz, 1974). More recently, Middletown, Ohio council member Dan Picard's 'three strikes' proposal called for paramedics to withhold Narcan from those they had already twice resuscitated. "Junkies," in Picard's words, "obviously don't care much about their lives and are expending lots of resources that we good citizens cannot afford" (Bacon, 2017). Bluntly, the proposal asked

paramedics to stand by and watch people die. In a resonant voice, Dr. Richard Sackler, former president of Purdue Pharma, maker of Oxycontin, declared that "We have to hammer on the abusers in every way possible. They are the culprits and the problem. They are reckless criminals" (Armstrong, 2019).

Within American schools, Drug Abuse Resistance Education, or D.A.R.E., remains the single most popular program for teaching students about the dangers of drugs. D.A.R.E. was conceived in 1983 as part of a demand-side control strategy within the War on Drugs. Although today it is offered in 75 percent of the nation's school districts to an estimated 26 million students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, its funding has dropped from a peak of $10 million in 2002 to under $4 million today (Ingraham, 2017). Both D.A.R.E. and the War on Drugs abide the Enlightenment notion that human beings are essentially pleasure-pain creatures driven by insatiable desires. Drugs, according to this assumption, are addictive because they bring pleasure. Fears of this obscene, forbidden pleasure continue to shape public discourse and policy.

Although 90 percent of elementary students report positive feelings about D.A.R.E., that number inverses by high school, with 90 percent expressing negative and/or indifferent feelings (Hamilton, 1997). Beginning in 1992, studies by Indiana University, RTI International, the California Department of Education, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of the Surgeon General, Harvard and Texas A&M Universities have found either that the program had no impact on students, or that students who completed D.A.R.E. abused drugs and alcohol at higher levels than those who did not (Ennett, Tobler, Ringwalt & Flewelling., 1994; Lynam, et al., 1999; Travis, 1994; Weiss, Murphy-Graham, Petrosino, & Gandhi., 2008).

Pointing to legislation requiring all federally-funded drug education programs to always portray Schedule I drugs—including cannabis, morphine, heroin, methamphetamine, LSD, psilocybin, and peyote—as wrong and harmful, critics insist that D.A.R.E. is not education but indoctrination (Gonnerman, 1999). The program fails to distinguish, for instance, between harmful abuse of opioids by those suffering addiction and prudent usage by patients dealing with pain from labor, tooth extractions,

and broken bones. Although peyote and psilocybin could also conceivably be abused, these substances have long served as ritualistic sacraments for indigenous peoples and today aid patients in the treatment of psycho-spiritual ailments.

In May of this year, Denver, Colorado became the first United States city to de-criminalize psilocybin mushrooms (Murray, 2019). This comes on the heels of two decades of scientific research into the therapeutic potential of psychedelics for treating addiction, anxiety, and depression. Most psychedelics are tryptamines that resemble serotonin and bind to receptors in the outer, most evolutionarily recent layer of the human mind-brain. These compounds appear to function primarily by reducing activity in what is called the Default Mode Network (DMN). Discovered in 2001, the DMN is the centrally located hub of brain function that links the cerebral cortex to deeper and older circuits of memory and emotion (Anticevic, et al., 2012; Falk, 2020).

The functioning of the DMN is vital to understanding a host of connected mental disorders including addiction, anxiety, and depression, which appear to arise from a narrowing of phenomenological context to one's self or ego. Excessively ordered, low-entropy brains with hyperactive DMNs produce uncontrollable introspection and ruminative loops of worry, trapping the person within a prison of one's own thoughts. The mind, in other words, becomes stuck in an egocentric narrative that the person feels powerless to shut off. Psychedelics act to quiet these overactive neural networks, producing in volunteers an egolytic or egoless state of consciousness and susceptibility to the mystical experience, that child-like sense of wonder that allows us to feel our full implication with the world around us, including fellow humanity and Mother Nature (Pollan, 2018, pp. 306-307, 313). Patients have described psychedelic psychotherapy variously as "de-patterning," "rebooting," or "defragging the brain," "pressing Ctrl-Alt-Delete," "shaking the snow globe," and "a holiday away from the prison of my brain" (Falk, 2020; Johnson, Garcia-Romeu, Cosmiano, & Griffiths,, 2014; Pollan, 2018, pp. 15, 320, 378, 381; Samorini, 2002, pp. 84-88).

During guided psychedelic sessions, volunteers frequently report that loss or weakening of the

ego increases their sense of connection to, or 'relational embeddedness' with, others and the larger world. By removing the self from the center of their narratives, volunteers maintain that their addictions and depressive thoughts lose power over them. Against the backdrop of a wider world newly teeming with significance, addicts report that drugs simply become irrelevant, so they stop using them (Pollan, 2018, p. 360). At both Johns Hopkins and New York University, researchers are finding psychedelics to be greater than three times more effective than Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors—or SSRIs, which are otherwise the most effective currently available medicines—for treating depression (Falk, 2020; Hoffman, 2016).

By examining mental health disorders both neurochemically *and* spiritually, psychedelic research suggests that a common root may lie in the overactive ego and sense of separateness and disconnection—from nature, God, others, or one's self—that it confers. Thus the appropriate antonym for 'spiritual' is not 'material' but 'egotistical' (Falk, 2020; Pollan, 2018, p. 390). Insights from research into psilocybin and other psychedelic compounds suggest that the sources of both our drug addiction and mass violence epidemics are not themselves drugs, guns, or individuals with broken brains. Rather, it is the egotistical infrastructure of neoliberal capitalism that deprives us of its heavily advertised enjoyments while ripping apart our communities, privatizing our suffering, and directing our grievances against the most vulnerable among us.

The late comedian, Bill Hicks (1992), once wondered why it is that we never hear positive drug stories on the news: "How about a positive drug story," he wondered, "just once, to base your decision on information rather than scare tactics and superstitions and lies. I think it would be newsworthy. 'Today a young man on drugs realized that matter is only energy condensed to a slow vibration, that we are all one consciousness experiencing itself subjectively. There is no such thing as death. Life is only a dream, and we are the imagination of ourselves'." . Hicks often closed his shows by propositioning audiences with a choice between fear and love: "The eyes of fear want you to put bigger locks on your door, buy guns, close yourself off. The eyes of love instead see all of us as one. Here's what we can do to change the

world right now: Take all that money we spend on weapons and defense each year and instead spend it feeding, clothing, and educating the poor of the world, which it would many times over, not one human being excluded."

Hicks's final point mirrors accounts of the *unio mystica,* or divine union, which Thomas Merton described as an awakening "from the dream of separateness," and which the astronaut, Edgar Mitchell, recounted as "an overwhelming sense of oneness, of connectedness…it wasn't 'Them and Us,'" he thought while staring down at Earth from outer space, "it was 'That's me!' 'That's all of it. It's one thing!'" (Quoted in Pollan, 2018, p. 359; Pope Francis, 2015) This experience of unity between self and other—wherein the other may be a person, Mother Nature, or even a work of art—is among the most common to be reported by psychedelic research subjects. Perhaps this perspective can foster understanding of ways in which egotism afflicts our educational institutions and inform efforts to combat the interrelated existential crises that we collectively face.

Democratic Education in the Heart of Empire

Empire and egotism are deeply rooted in modern schooling. Mid-19th century Whig reformers designed schools with the explicit purpose of producing obedient and productive workers while rendering the masses loyal subjects of the state: subsuming the educational aims of knowledge, reason, and beauty; flattening free will and personal sovereignty into the organized inertia of the herd (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). The daily pledge of allegiance to the flag, lamented Randolph Bourne (1918, paragraph 42), is not a pledge to "the country as a cultural group, following certain ideals of life, but solely a symbol of the political state, inseparable from its prestige and expansion. The flag is most intimately connected with military achievement, military memory. It represents the country not in its intensive life, but in its far-flung challenge to the world. The flag is primarily the banner of war."

Schooling has historically played a centripetal organizational role in American life. For better and worse, schools are places where we come to know about the world and our place within it. Horace Mann, the father of the Common School, advocated for compulsory attendance laws by promising working class

parents that the institution would offer their children an escape hatch from the wage enslavement to which the Industrial Revolution had erstwhile condemned them. Here in our own time, neoliberal reforms have nudged students, teachers, and parents into the phenomenological pitfalls of egotism, wherein schools—particularly colleges and universities—serve primarily as means for individuals to maximize their job-market value (Brown, 2016). Conditioned by a winner-take-all culture of savage inequalities, our boys and girls suffer staggering rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality directly attributable to the pressures of school performance (See Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019). Meanwhile, standardized examinations, curricular regimentation, and merit pay choke the critical and imaginative capacities necessary for citizens to claim significant authorship of their own lives. Most perniciously, racial and economic school segregation conceal from us the realities facing huge swaths of our fellow Americans, thereby preventing us from recognizing and joining together in common cause.

In the years prior to his assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr. (*Beyond Vietnam,* 1967, paragraph 47) implored his fellow Americans to "rapidly shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered." King (*Where Do We Go,* 1967) saw these triple evils as "forms of violence that exist in a vicious cycle. They are interrelated and stand as the greatest barriers to our living in the Beloved Community." In the 1960's it appeared that a generation of young men and women, inspired by such visions as Dr. King's, educated as to the ways of their world, and unencumbered by debt, believed that they could impose their democratic will upon the larger society to end racism, corporatism, militarism, and patriarchy (*Berkeley in the Sixties,* 1990).

As expressed in Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell's 1971 Memorandum and in the Trilateral Commission's 1975 publication, 'The Crisis of Democracy,' vanguards of American empire became concerned that schools, referred to explicitly as the "institutions responsible for the indoctrination of the young," were failing to adequately capture the minds of the youth and thus jeopardizing the prevailing imperial order (Crozier, Huntington & Watanuki, 1975; Powell, 1971). Throughout the ensuing decades, a

neoliberal and neo-fascist counter-revolution intensified its war against the poor and working classes not only through mass incarceration, right-to-work laws, and federalist society judicial appointments, but also with strategic defunding of public education (Brown, 2016; Gibson & Ross, 2009; Giroux, 2017). Concurrently, as James Baldwin (2016) morosely observed, corporate America groomed lotophage masses who could neither live without their prosperity nor understand the price paid for it. The programming industries designed not to trouble, but rather reassure us, and so weakened our ability to deal with the world as it is, and with ourselves as we are.

Consistently, however, countervailing forces have advanced democracy through education by promoting justice, equality, civic duty, and collective responsibility. As Acosta, Foster & Houchen (2018) documented, many African-American communities have persisted in assuming that schools exist not as a zero-sum competition for diplomas and degrees, but to benefit the entire nation by providing pathways to freedom and citizenship for all. This has entailed refusal to sort students based upon perceived ability and adoption of curricula designed to address the actual challenges and opportunities of the communities in which students and teachers live (Hannah-Jones, 2016). These schools, wrote Kristina Rizga (2019), encourage students to ask the question, 'What should I be learning, and why?' rather than, 'Will this be on the test?' and 'How can I gain extra points?'

Based upon this essay's analysis, the challenges and opportunities facing any particular school district will bear holographic resemblance to those facing all districts. Distinct from 'drug education', 'violence prevention', 'environmental sustainability', and 'workforce training', a curriculum oriented to combating the common egotistical root of our contemporary crises would begin by exposing and inoculating against the existential violence of bourgeois subjectivity, a task perhaps best approached by consulting indigenous wisdom. Such an education would necessarily be a spiritual endeavor, not limited to any particular religion, but designed to evoke wonder, deepen relationships with Mother Nature, and transmit a substantive and anthropologically informed ontology of human being. The cultivation of human agency, self-determination, and free will in our time and place requires an education oriented to

combating the legacies of patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalist political economy, and imperialist ideology that together grip our ego strings and propel the Sixth Extinction. Victories achieved by students, teachers, and parents around the globe and here in the heart of empire may perhaps inspire our courage.

Drawing upon their roots in the labor and civil rights movements, teachers from West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Los Angeles, Sacramento, Chicago, and scores of other districts—animated by the ethic that every child deserves the chance to become a whole human person—have fought for and won better, more humane working and learning conditions for themselves and their students (Pedersen, 2019). This teacher strike wave arrived as citizens of the world—from Hong Kong to France, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Chile, Ecuador, Algeria, Sudan, South Africa, Malawi, Lebanon, Iraq, India, Kazakhstan, Russia, and elsewhere—took to the streets against corruption, austerity, inequality, and governmental inaction in the face of mounting climate catastrophe (Diehl, 2019; Ghitis, 2019; Zakaria, 2019). Gathering in the teeth of militarized police forces, these fellow citizens of the world describe the sense of being overcome by a spirit of unity and solidarity more powerful than fear (Cohen, 2019; Fithian, 2019; Varjacques, Jensen & Weeks, 2018). Perhaps through similar actions we can conjure this spirit to confront the imperial hydra of the armaments industry that haunts our nightmares, the pharmaceutical industry that unleashed a genocidal opioid blizzard upon our most vulnerable, the digital technology industry that claims our private human experience as free raw material for its purposes of behavioral modification and profit maximization (Zuboff, 2019), the fossil fuel industry that poisons our water, chokes our air, and speeds the winds of climate annihilation, the political and financial class that sells our future, and the national state that every day plays nuclear roulette with all of life on Earth.

Conclusion

The existential crises of America's declining empire express themselves holographically in cities and towns across the country. Economic decline, drug addiction, revanchist violence, militarism, and climate-fueled natural disasters are symptomatic of the egotism rooted in our past and evident in our present.

Although the inertia of these woes appears inexorable, resources from our spiritual and political traditions suggest that they can be countered by dissolving the phenomenological confines of the ego. While American schools reproduce a malignant bourgeois subjectivity through their solemn competitions, prizes, and inequities, we also find schools able to articulate compelling democratic alternatives, driven by educators who see students as possessed of the potential for full humanity, beyond the imperial and egotistical horizons of our age.

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