

Policy Makers Are Driving Us Crazy

by Chris Hedges

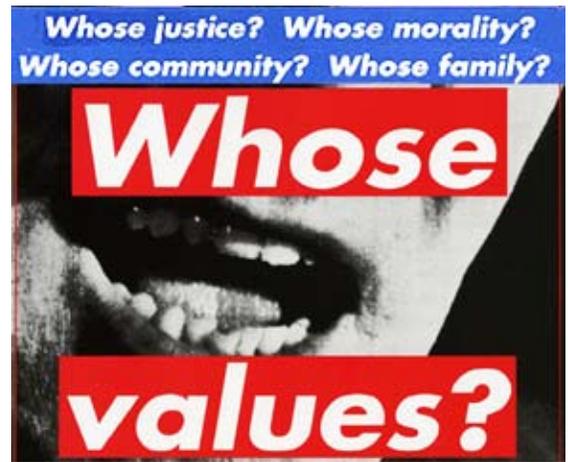
This is an excerpt from *Welcome to the Asylum* by Chris Hedges published on April 30, 2012 on [Truthdig.com](http://truthdig.com)

When civilizations start to die they go insane. Let the ice sheets in the Arctic melt. Let the temperatures rise. Let the air, soil and water be poisoned. Let the forests die. Let the seas be emptied of life. Let one useless war after another be waged. Let the masses be thrust into extreme poverty and left without jobs while the elites, drunk on hedonism, accumulate vast fortunes through exploitation, speculation, fraud and theft.

The quest by a bankrupt elite in the final days of empire to accumulate greater and greater wealth is modern society's version of primitive fetishism. This quest, as there is less and less to exploit, leads to mounting repression, increased human suffering, a collapse of infrastructure and, finally, collective death. The World Health Organization calculates that one in four people in the United States suffers from chronic anxiety, a mood disorder or depression—which seems to me to be a normal reaction to our march toward collective suicide.

When the most basic elements that sustain life are reduced to a cash product, life has no intrinsic value. The extinguishing of societies defined by animism and mysticism, that celebrate ambiguity and mystery, that respect the centrality of the human imagination, removes the only ideological counterweight to a self-devouring capitalist ideology. Those who structure themselves around a communal life and self-sacrifice rather than hoarding and wage exploitation, can not be accommodated within the ethic of capitalist exploitation, the cult of the self and the lust for imperial expansion.

Rebuilding this older vision of community, one based on cooperation rather than exploitation, will be as important to our survival as changing our patterns of consumption, growing food locally and ending our dependence on fossil fuels. Pre-modern societies did not subordinate the sacred to the technical. The deities they worshipped were not outside of or



separate from nature.

The conflation of technological advancement with human progress leads to self-worship. Reason makes possible the calculations, science and technological advances of industrial civilization, but reason does not connect us with the forces of life. A society that loses the capacity for the sacred, that lacks the power of human imagination, that cannot practice empathy, ultimately ensures its own destruction. The Native Americans understood there are powers and forces we can never control and must honor. They knew, as did the ancient Greeks, that hubris is the deadliest curse of the human race. This is a lesson that we will probably have to learn for ourselves at the cost of tremendous suffering. It is the self-deluded, those on Wall Street or among the political elite, those who entertain and inform us, those who lack the capacity to question the lusts that will ensure our self-annihilation, who are held up as exemplars of intelligence, success and progress.

All that concerns itself with beauty and truth, with those forces that have the power to transform us, is being steadily extinguished by our corporate state. Art. Education. Literature. Music. Theater. Dance. Poetry. Philosophy. Religion. Journalism. None of these disciplines are worthy in the corporate state of support or compensation. These are pursuits that, even in our universities, are condemned as impractical. But it is only through the impractical, through that which can empower our imagination, that we will be rescued as a species. The prosaic world of news events, the collection of scientific and factual data, stock market statistics and the sterile recording of deeds as history do not permit us to understand the elemental speech of imagination. We will never penetrate the mystery of creation, or the meaning of existence, if we do not recover this older language. Poetry shows a man his soul, and it is our souls that the culture of imperialism, business and technology seeks to crush.

Chris Hedges worked 15 years for The New York Times as a foreign correspondent. He is now a fellow at the Nation Institute and writes a weekly column at truthdig.com.

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