**The Limping Left**

**Can’t run, can’t walk, can’t even crawl**

**Richard Gale and Gary Null**

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In his seminal 1978 essay, The Power of the Powerless, former political dissident and later Czech president Vaclav Havel wrote:

“The Post-Totalitarian system is mounting a total assault on humans and humans stand against it alone, abandoned and isolated. It is therefore entirely natural that all the “dissident” movements are explicitly defensive movements; they exist to defend human beings and the genuine aims of life against the aims of the system.”

Dissident groups in the US have traditionally been associated with the liberal Left that has championed workers’ rights, unions, civil liberties, gender and racial equality, and humane policies that support and uplift citizens at the bottom of the class war heap. Not unlike the dissidents during the days of the Soviet regime, today’s Left is now forced to operate within a system of militarized control and security surveillance that Havel labeled Post-Totalitarian. The dictatorial system that has now washed over the American landscape can more properly be called “inverted totalitarianism,” a term coined by Princeton political scientist Sheldon Wollen, who is widely recognized as one of the fathers of the modern free-speech movement. Rather than conventional totalitarianism as rule by a dictator, tyrant or junta who usurps power through frequently non-democratic and often violent means, “inverted totalitarianism” is a reversal of the traditional definition. It refers to an internal perversion of democratic principles through an allegiance between government and corporate interests at the expense of the popular electorate’s domestic demands.[1] This is the current state of the populace’s struggles.

Washington continually favors the well-being and preservation of corporations and private industries rather than the masses who have been victimized and destroyed by these very same corporations unrelenting pursuit for profit and power. In turn, the government must create a militarized police state of domestic surveillance and high-tech spy networks to assure the corporate imperium is safe and protected from public outrage.

The Occupy Movement was a small glimmer of an what Havel termed an “existential revolution.” Regardless of its failures, it nevertheless brought the simmering disgust and outrage towards our political system to the surface and the attention of millions of Americans at home. Yet this was primarily a rebellion of America’s youth who imagined new ways of protest. On the other hand, the old guard of the American Liberal Left suffers from a severe, existential identity crisis. It’s collective dissociative disorder is especially prominent in alternative, liberal media. Divided and fragmented, directionless and forever struggling for funds, it has been incapable of orchestrating Havel’s “existential revolution” that could ignite a “moral reconstitution of society” and a “radical renewal of the relationship of human beings” to what he called “the human order, which no political order can replace.” [2] This was a fundamental message learned from the Occupy protestors.

Later Havel retitled this existential revolution as a spiritual renewal; however what he advocated was a secular renewal based upon higher, universal principles, unaffiliated with religion nor having any relationship with mainstream pop spirituality. Havel’s renewal was based solely upon a truth that emerges from non-judgmental observation of everyday life. It would then follow its own “intrinsic laws” that are deeply rooted in our shared humanity and the space we share together on the planet.

The powerlessness of the leading programs in the Left media and their networks, are not without their past precedents. Robert McChesney’s outstanding 1994 publication about the early history of American media between 1925 and 1935, Telecommunications, Mass Media and Democracy recounting the ideological struggle between opposing media organizations, is a telling example of the failures in public radio and media.[3] Public broadcasting has traditionally been based upon the premise that a well-informed, educated society can more effectively preserve democracy, social justice and civil liberties. It required independence from outside commercial interests, advertising and partisan influences that would otherwise influence and frame the dissemination of educational material against the greater public interest.

Early in the 1930s, two organizations emerged that would struggle over the strategic principles behind station production and programming that could effectively educate people. First, in 1930, the National Committee on Education by Radio (NCER) was launched to spearhead media reform. The NCER was staunchly anti-commercial, fully aware of the dangers of private corporate and political interests that threaten to pollute education and dilute authentic populist social platform run for and by the people.

Months later, the National Advisory Council on Radio in Education (NACRE) was founded with financing from John D Rockefeller and the Carnegie Corporation. Although both the NCER and the NACRE envisioned public programming as a practicable means for broad education, NACRE promulgated the idea that such broadcasting should be privatized and work with commercial networks rather than stand in opposition to the private sector and its institutions.

Commenting on McChesney’s research, British scholar Michael Barker, noted that “while NCER was clearly more progressive than NACRE, in many ways NCER still remained an elitist organization.”[4] The problem of Left elitism has not disappeared and continues to be a factor compromising the Left’s inability to identify with the plight of Americans maltreated by the regressive corporate powers dominating Washington and writing the laws of the land. Its self-image of intellectual superiority, not moving beyond the alternative airwaves and media sources, has failed to mobilize the popular sentiments necessary to create a viable social force, speaking truth to power, and to muster the solidarity and strength that is indispensible for launching an existential revolution.

NCER and its mission for a public free-speech platform, independent of corporate commercial media, fizzled out in 1936. Hence the NACRE, heavily influenced by the monies of industrial moguls who had their own agenda on how and for reason the masses should be educated hence became the sole voice in channeling the direction of educational radio. McChesney provides several reasons for NCER’s collapse. On the one hand, a poor economy that continued to linger from the 1928 economic collapse made funding near impossible without relying on corporate advertising. NACRE therefore had a clear advantage by aligning with commercial interests. But more important according to McChesney was NCER’s “political incompetence” and lack of “capacity for engaging in the type of full-scale political battle that was necessary.”[5] The lack of operational and administrative skills, and a deeper insight into the political apparatus and the institutions who do Washington’s and the corporate regime’s business limited the organization’s effectiveness and ability to reach the larger population.

Fast forward to our present moment and we observe a déjà vu of the NCER-NACRE battle unfolding in certain sectors of today’s Left media and news outlets. Similar to the NCER, a culture of elitism, managerial incompetence and lack of purpose have poised some free-speech, non-commercial entities towards an immanent collapse into irrelevancy.

Analyzing the NCER-NACRE distinctions, Barker identifies a fundamental failure behind the Left’s “elitist” faction within the liberal progressive movement: while “progressive activists tend to call for more substantial and participatory forms of democratic governance,” the so-called liberal foundations upon which they receive funding are “more interested in promoting procedural democracy and polyarchy.”

The consequence is that the elitism of the Left’s media, its refusal to get its hands dirty, keeps the political debate cerebral and abstract. It remains disconnected from the masses who actively challenge the citadels of power. In more philosophical terms, the Left has become divorced from the “intentions of life,” a guiding principle behind Havel’s revolution in the war against the “intentions of the system,” that is now defined by America’s totalitarian security state to redefine democracy in its own image.

Although having positioned itself as the flagship philanthropic foundation for human rights, the Ford Foundation has a deep relationship with the CIA going back to the early 1950s. Ford has repeatedly enabled the agency to fund “a seemingly limitless range of covert action programs affecting youth groups, labor unions, universities, publishing houses and other private institutions.[6] There is no secret to the Ford-CIA collaboration. As Attorney General, Robert Kennedy launched an investigation into the CIA’s use of the Ford Foundation and other philanthropic groups as “conduits” for funding domestic operations, in violation of federal law.[7] Long ago, the CIA had discovered that supporting and funding select liberal enterprises and organizations, while sidelining others, would assure the more conservative elements on the Left would offset and lessen the influence of the more radical movements who were on the ground struggling and fighting for human rights causes. Barker notes that “counter to popular misunderstandings of their work, rather than promoting progressive and more participatory forms of democracy, liberal philanthropy [eg. Ford Foundation, Soros, etc] actually serves the opposite purpose by helping preserve growing inequalities thereby legitimizing the status quo.”[8] As of 2011, many reputable and successful alternative media sources receive funds from Ford, including The Progressive, Mother Jones, Alternative Radio, Democracy Now!, the ACLU, Z Magazine, and FAIR.

Major media on both the right and left ignore the deeper moral questions that define the struggle of America’s soul and the forces between good and evil. The ethics of liberal broadcasting categorically ignore the ethical issues and “moral framing” that George Lakoff, at the University of California in Berkeley, often refers to as critical for winning over the emotions of people’s hearts and minds. Frequently we hear the expression “balanced reporting.” Fox News describes itself as “fair and balanced,” and Bill O’Reilly thinks of himself as the “fairest guy on the planet.” One popular national program advertises “real debates” about the day’s current events and urgent national and international issues between opposing sides. Yet in all cases, such fairness and balance is reconfigured into a dialogue framed by our oligarchic feudalist culture. Moreover both the elite right and left critics of Washington continue to espouse a system of power that is alienated from the higher principles upon which an existential revolution or spiritual renewal can emerge. Debates wont bring reform and only further exacerbate the Left’s dilemma of irrelevance to the average person. The only debate, according to Chris Hedges, might be the most expedient way to leave policy debates aside and then to “step outside the mechanisms of power” to actively challenge the system.

Having hosted a program on Pacifica for several decades and voluntarily without a salary from the foundation, I have witnessed first hand the rapid demise of the Left’s media. Although I clearly position myself as sympathetic and supportive of left principles on social issues such as universal healthcare, consumer protection from the profiteering by any means from banks and corporations, the dismantling of insolvent banks, the corporate corruption of Washington, free public education through college, and programs to raise people out of poverty, I curiously discover that the audience of my radio broadcasts and public events are largely nonpartisan, independent conservatives. A notable percentage embrace the capitalist, neoliberal agenda; however, they simultaneously endorse non-sectarian spiritual values that are universal in scope, mirroring Havel’s call for spiritual renewal, and they honor the beliefs of many rather than the superiority complexes and aberrant, amoral beliefs of the ruling elite. The short-sighted hypocrisy on the Left ignores the perceptions and beliefs of an important segment of the American population who do not endorse either party. However, while independent conservatives and radical liberals may disagree on many issues, there are also many points of convergence where right and left do meet. The intellectual hubris of the Left has diligently isolated these very same people who might otherwise have an open ear to unite with the Left on specific causes.

Radical rhetoric that may rightly call to account the betrayals and crimes of free-market capitalism, the rapidly evolving police and corporate security state, and a corporate-controlled government in Washington, which are now effectively dissociated and alien from the citizenry is insufficient for a radical transformation into what Havel called a “post-democratic” world. For this reason, Chris Hedges repeatedly calls for a new movement that embraces a moral imperative to speak against racism, class warfare, empire building through the military industrial complex, economic equanimity, and human rights. This moral imperative must also be voiced outside the structures of hierarchical power. Radical fundamental change will never occur by wasting energy on tiny incremental changes within a totalitarian system, a system that is now firmly cemented into the American politick and is here to stay for a long time to come. In his criticism of the liberal Left, Hedges also points at an intellectual elitism divorced from the larger ethical issues the world faces and its failure to address the questions of justice within a moral frame. Any form of elitism is incapable of mustering the empathy necessary to identify with the suffering and abuses orchestrated by both the corporate Democrat and Republican agendas. Programs, from either the Left or Right, that do nothing more than provide harsh criticism of Washington and our political apparatus actually serve the purposes of the regime by keeping dissident voices divided. The top philanthropic foundations giving to liberal media know this well, which is why they are so willing to reward these programs in order to be certain that particular and more radical issues are not entertained over the media waves.

For example, although the majority of Americans, and a much larger percentage of Europeans don’t believe the official 911 Commission report, this topic is anathema on many of the most popular liberal and progressive radio programs and news sites. Others categorically refute alternative and revisionist histories of events contrary to the government’s word and outright charges them as conspiracy theories without thorough examination, including those who oppose the official reports of 911 and the assassinations of JFK and MLK.

I often say that the Left mastered the “art of exclusion.” It is not solely left vs right, members of one tribe versus all others. Rather it is a deep division within the modern Left’s zeitgeist because it is incapable of defining itself nor its mission and role in the world. And there is absolutely no interest in the mainstream media, nor the corporate state, to focus upon society’s actual needs—real health, environmental sustainability, and our deeper spiritual needs that transcend religious dogmas. The voices across media have become a morass of confusion between America as an oasis and an utter wasteland.

There are those who believe that Americans have become a dumbed down species, disenfranchised by Washington and Wall Street, and left angry and helpless. This may be partially true. However, during a conversation with the renowned scholar on spirituality, Andrew Harvey, he stated that he discovered among in the communities in the Ozarks, poor rugged, decent and strong-hearted individuals who “are not intoxicated by the American dream.” Rather they view it as “a nightmare and ridiculous but have no public voice.” I suspect this is a characteristic that can be found all across rural America, where millions of families harbor feelings of having been forgotten and betrayed by their government.

It is not possible to resist the emerging fascism in Washington without understanding the nature of its power before us. In theological terms, Hedges calls it “systems of death.” According to Harvey, “we are seeing the beginnings of the creation of the most terrifying fascist state in history.” He continues, the oligarchic elite are “fed by the dark. They’re sustained by the dark. They’re protected by the dark, and at the moment the dark is winning in ways that are simply terrifying to anybody who sees the world as it really is.”

For an ethical, educational media to become relevant again, it will require a harsh realization that seemingly independent voices, both Left and Right, exist within the “intentions of the system.” Both mainstream and independent media are being abandoned by those who seek to live lives with dignity, meaning and purpose and who are willing to stand up for those human rights. Hedges suggests that a leap from the practicality of simply surviving within the system to a new moral imperative is incumbent for the American citizenry to again occupy a public space. Public space has increasingly been eroded by a totalitarian corporate-government apparatus that is determined to extinguish dissent through a psychology of fear and security suppression. A new media, which embraces the best of moral frameworks, universal in scope, from all constituencies outside the ruling class, needs to be born again, not repeatedly fooled-again. Such a renewal requires deep reflection of conscience into the soul of humanity and participation in the preservation of the environment in league with all other species, and finding the courage to empathize with the millions of victims of the oligarchic regime. When ethical media finally walks the talk, empowering others with a moral framing of the threats before us, then progressive action will become a vital force towards political and social change.

It is time for people to get real about where we are, what we are up against, and the extent and danger of the crisis. Mainstream media, and any media for that matter with corporate sponsorship and funding from major foundations that support the Washington Consensus are suspect of misinformation and moral laxity. The first step is to educate ourselves about the extent of the threat before us and generate a sound moral and ethical basis upon which to evaluate and discern the media’s onslaught of twisted messages. And then dare yourself to connect with what Harvey calls the “outraged heartbreak at the core of your being and then make a commitment to do something real in your local community about you’ve identified as your heartbreak.” Separate yourselves from the illusion of images channeled through the television screen, and begin to identify with an alternative worldview that will gradually unfold after our present regime of imperial grandiosity collapses into the dustbin of history.

**Richard Gale** is the Executive Producer of the Progressive Radio Network and a former Senior Research Analyst in the biotech and genomic industries.

**Dr. Gary Null** is the host of the nation’s longest running public radio program on nutrition and natural health and a multi-award-winning director of progressive documentary films, including Seeds of Death (2012) and Silent Epidemic: The Untold Story of Vaccines (2013 )

[1] Wollen, Sheldon. Democracy Inc: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008

[2] Vaclav Havel and the Existential Revolution” Religious Left Law. http://www.religiousleftlaw.com/2011/12/v%C3%A1clav-havel-the-existential-revolution.html#sthash.bnboRuKU.dpuf

[3] McChesney, Robert. Telecommunications, Mass Media and Democracy: The Battle for Control of US Broadcasting 1928-1935. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

[4] Barker, Michael. “The Liberal Foundations of Media Reform? Creating Sustainable Funding Opportunities for Radical Media Reform.” Global Research, June 3, 2008

[5] Barker, Ibid.

[6] Saunders, Frances. Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War. Granta Books, 1999, pp. 134-135).

[7] Bramhall, Stuart Jeanne. “The Ford Foundation and the CIA” April 13, 2011. http://open.salon.com/blog/stuartbramhall/2011/04/13/the\_ford\_foundation\_and\_the\_cia

[8] Barker, op cit.