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The Anguish in the American Dream

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The Anguish in the American Dream. I believe that to be fully alive today is to live with anguish, not for one's own condition in the world but for the condition of a broken world. My anguish flows not from the realization that it is getting harder for people to live the American dream but from the recognition that the American dream has made it harder to hold together the living world. So our task tonight is to tell the truth about the domination that I think is at the heart of the American dream so that we may more honestly face the brokenness of our world. Only then can we embrace the anguish of the American dream and confront our moment in history.

Let's start with the origins of this phrase "the American dream." A man named James Truslow Adams appears to have been the first to have used the phrase "the American dream" in print, in his 1931 book called *The Epic of America*. This stockbroker turned historian defined the dream as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone." But he didn't reduce the American dream to materialism, and he emphasized U.S. social mobility in contrast with more rigid European class systems. "It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable and be recognized by others for what they are regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." Adams was, in fact, quite concerned about the growing materialism of U.S. life, and he wondered about "the ugly scars which have been left on us by our three centuries of exploitation and conquest of the continent." Remember, he was writing at the beginning of the Great Depression, coming off the go-go years of the 1920s. So, perhaps not surprisingly, his list of these problems may sound familiar to us, and I'll quote them at length.

He asks how it was that we came to insist upon business and money-making and material improvement as good in themselves. How they took on the aspects of moral virtues. How we came to consider an unthinking optimism essential. How we refuse to look on the seamy and sordid realities of any situation in which we found ourselves. How we regarded criticism as obstructive and dangerous for our new communities. How we came to think manners undemocratic and a cultivated mind a hindrance to success, a sign of inefficient effeminacy. How the size and statistics of material development came to be more important in our eyes than quality and spiritual

values. How, in the ever-shifting advance of the frontier, we came to lose sight of the past in hopes for the future. How we forgot to live in the struggle to make a living. How our education tended to become utilitarian or aimless. And how other unfortunate traits, only too notable today, were developed. A list that seems to be relevant to us today.

For all these concerns, Adams believed that the U.S. could overcome these problems as long as the dream endured. That led him into the dead end of clichés. He says, "If we are to make the dream come true, we must all work together, no longer to build bigger but to build better." For Adams, as the book's title makes clear, the story of America is an epic and, as he put it, "The epic loses all its glory without the dream." But I want to argue that dreams of glory are bound to betray us. And 80 years after the question that he is posing we must face whether the story of the United States is an epic or a tragedy. I'll say more on that later.

Let's talk about the relationship of the American dream to domination. Adams' definition of the dream as the belief that life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone is rather abstract. So what do we really mean by the American dream? One historian, who wrote a short history of the idea, highlights the dreams of religious freedom, political independence, racial equality, upward mobility, home ownership, and personal fulfillment that run throughout U.S. history and define the dream. But a concept that is used by so many people, over such a length of time, for so many different purposes is never going to be easily defined. Rather than try to organize all that complexity, I want to focus on what has made the American dream possible. I think that much is rather simple.

The American dream is born of and maintained by domination. By this claim I don't mean that the American dream is to dominate, although, of course, many who claim to be living the American dream seem to revel in their ability to dominate. What I'm arguing instead is that whatever the specific articulation of the American dream, it is built on domination. I think this is the obvious truth on the surface, the reality that most dreamers want to leave out. Perhaps because it leads to a rather painful question: How deeply woven into the fabric of U.S. society is the domination/subordination dynamic on which this country's wealth and freedom are based?

Let's look at the American dream, first the American part. We all understand that the United States of America can dream only because of one of the most extensive acts of genocide in recorded human history. When Europeans landed on this continent, the region that was to eventually include the United States, there were, of course, people here. Population estimates vary, but a conservative estimate is 12 million people north of the Rio Grande, perhaps 2 million in Canada, about 10 million in what is now the continental United States. By the end of the so-called Indian wars, the 1900 census recorded 237,000 indigenous people left alive in the U.S. Depending on the numbers you use, that's an extermination rate of somewhere between 95% and 99%. That is to say that the European colonists and their heirs, including me, successfully eliminated almost the entire indigenous population, or the "merciless Indian savages," as they are labeled in the Declaration of Independence, of course one of the most famous articulations of the American dream. That is to say, almost every Indian died in the course of the European invasion to create the United States so that we may dream our dreams. Millions of people died for the crime of being inconveniently located on land desired by Europeans who believed in their right to dominate. This American part of the dream goes on to include African slavery, millions of more people killed in the expansion of the dream. The domination is there at the beginning and continues to this very day.

Second, let's talk about the dream part of the American dream. Adams pointed out that while the American dream is always about more than money, the idea of getting one's fair share of the American bounty is also, I think, at the core of the American dream. That bounty, however, did not just drop out of the sky. It was ripped from the ground and drawn from the water in a fashion that has now left the continent ravaged—a dismemberment of nature that is an unavoidable consequence of a world view that glorifies domination. "From the Europeans' first arrival, we have behaved as if nature must be subdued or ignored," writes the scientist Wes Jackson, who is one of the leading thinkers in the sustainable agriculture movement. As Jackson points out, our economy has always been extractive, even before the Industrial Revolution dramatically accelerated the assault in the 19th century and the petrochemical revolution began poisoning the world more intensively in the 20th century. From the start, we mined the forests, soil, and aquifers, just as we eventually mined minerals and fossil fuels, leaving ecosystems ragged and in ruin, perhaps beyond recovery in any meaningful human time frame. All that was done by people who believed in their right to dominate. I think this kind of analysis helps us critique the naïve notions of opportunity and bounty in the American dream. The notion of endless opportunity for all in the American dream is routinely invoked by those who seem unconcerned about the inherent inequality in capitalism or

those determined to ignore the deeply embedded white supremacy that expresses itself to this day in institutional and unconscious racism, which constrains indigenous, black, Latino people in the U.S.

The notion of endless bounty in the American dream leads people to believe that because such bounty has always been available, that it will continue to be available through the alleged magic of technology. In America the dreamers want to believe that the domination of people to clear the frontier was acceptable, and now, with that frontier gone, the ever more intense domination of nature to keep the bounty flowing is acceptable. Of course, the U.S. is not the only place in the world where greed has combined with fantasies of superiority to produce horrific crimes. Nor is it the only place where humans have relentlessly degraded ecosystems. But the U.S. is the wealthiest and most powerful country in the history of the world and the country that claims for itself an unique place in history, the so-called "city upon a hill" that serves, in the words of one of our Texas U.S. Senators as "the beacon to the world of the way life should be," if you weren't aware of that, Texas, "the beacon to the world of the way life should be."

The American dream is put forward for all the world to adopt, but it clearly can't be so. Some of the people of the world have had to be sacrificed for that dream, as has the larger living world. Dreams based on domination are by definition limited dreams. Wes Jackson reminds us of how these two forms of domination come together in the U.S. when he tells us, "We are still more the cultural descendants of Columbus and Coronado than we are of the natives we replaced." Citing the writer Wendell Berry, Jackson points out that "as we came across the continent, cutting the forest and plowing the prairies, we never knew what we were doing because we never knew what we were undoing." Dreams based on domination by people over the nonhuman world are dreams only for the short term. Dreams based on domination by some people over others are dreams only for the privileged. As Malcolm X put it, "I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream. I see an American nightmare."

A world, I'm arguing, that is based on domination and subordination is inevitably a profoundly unjust world and a fundamentally unsustainable world. So let's talk a bit about those two ideas.

This is the state of our unjust world. According to World Bank statistics, a third of the people on the planet live on less than \$2 per day U.S., while half of the people on the planet live on less than \$2.50 a day. That means at least half the people in this world cannot meet basic expenditures for the food, clothing, shelter, health, and education necessary for a minimally decent life. Concern about this is not confined to radical idealists. Consider the judgment of James Wolfenson made near the end of his term as president of the World Bank. Wolfenson said, "It

is time to take a cold, hard look at the future. Our planet is not balanced. Too few control too much and many have too little to hope for. Too much turmoil, too many wars, too much suffering. The demographics of the future speak to a growing imbalance of people, resources, and the environment. If we act together now, we can change the world for the better. If we do not, we shall leave greater and more intractable problems for our children.”

Let’s take a moment to consider the state of our unsustainable world. Look at any measure of the health of the ecosystems of this continent. I don’t care what measure you look at. Groundwater depletion, topsoil loss, chemical contamination, increased toxicity in our own bodies, the number and size of dead zones in the oceans, accelerating extinction of species, and the reduction of biodiversity all suggest we may be past the point of restoration. This warning comes from 1,700 of the world’s leading scientists, who said, “Human beings in the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about.” That statement was issued in 1992. In the past two decades it’s hard to see evidence that we have changed course.

As a result of this, these days if somebody comes to me and asks for my support for an idea or a project or an institution of some sort, I ask, Will these things make some contribution to the struggle for justice and sustainability? That’s my benchmark question. No one idea, project, or institution, of course, is going to solve all our problems, and perhaps even no combination of them can save us. But I think this is a reasonable question to ask of everything in our lives. On those criteria, the American dream does not fare so well. I have concluded that the American dream is inconsistent with social justice and ecological sustainability, so I am against the American dream. I don’t want to rescue, redefine, or renew the American dream. I want us all to recognize the need to transcend the domination/subordination dynamic at the heart of the American dream. If we can manage that, the dream would fade, as dreams do, when we awaken and come into consciousness. That’s my principled argument.

Let’s consider some questions about political and rhetorical strategy, because, of course, these are important considerations. Let me start by telling you a story about a phone call I got sometime around the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The phone call came from a *New York Times* reporter who was working on a piece about the antiwar movement’s attempt to rally folks around the idea that peace is patriotic. Remember those bumper stickers? “Peace is Patriotic.” I hate those bumper stickers. I always

did. He asked my opinion. And I told him that I never used the phrase and, in fact, that I routinely argued against the concept of patriotism. Instead of trying to redefine patriotism, I wanted to abandon the concept as intellectually, politically, and morally indefensible. This reporter from *The New York Times* was intrigued and he asked me to explain. Know, this was the first and so far the only time I have been interviewed by a *New York Times* reporter.

So even though I know the reporters at the newspaper—it’s a tool of the ruling class; that’s well-known—I still couldn’t help but want to make a good impression. So first I pointed out that critiques of patriotism at this fundamental level have been made by radicals in the past for quite a long time and there was nothing all that new in what I was going to say. And then I explained my argument, which is contained in one of the books I wrote, called *Citizens of the Empire*. He listened patiently and then said he couldn’t see a hole in the argument but that it didn’t really matter. He said, “No one’s going to buy that.” So my position, no matter how compelling, as you can imagine, didn’t end up in his story.

Perhaps I can take some solace in knowing that he thought my argument was correct. But it’s not enough just to be correct. We want also to be effective. So the question I think we should ask is, is an argument irrelevant if it can’t be communicated widely in mainstream culture? And is that the fate of any assault on the idea of an American dream? It’s certainly true that the American dream is a deeply rooted part of the ideology of superiority of the dominant culture. I think there’s evidence all around that this ideology is more deeply entrenched than ever—perhaps precisely because the decline of American power and wealth is so obvious and people are scared and scrambling. But just because an idea can’t be easily communicated to the mainstream I think does not mean we should avoid such radical critiques and simply water things down to play to the mainstream. In fact, I believe this is a time when such critiques are more important than ever.

That analysis stems from an assessment of the political terrain on which I think we operate today. I would argue this is not a mass-movement moment in American history, not a time in which large numbers of Americans are likely to engage in political activity that challenges basic systems of power and wealth. I believe we are in a period in which the most important work is creating the organizations and networks that will be important in the future, when the political conditions will change, for better or worse. Whatever is coming, we are going to need sharper analysis, stronger vehicles for action, and more resilient connections among people.

In short, I think this is a cadre-building moment in history. Although for some people the phrase “cadre building” may invoke the worst of the left’s revolutionary dogmatism, I have something different in mind than that

tradition. For me, cadre does not mean vanguard or self-appointed bearers of truth who annoy you endlessly in every meeting. Instead, I think it signals commitment, but with an openness to rethinking theory and practice. And I don't believe I'm being unrealistic here. I see this kind of organizing in groups that I know of in Austin such as Third Coast Workers for Cooperation, the Workers Defense Project, and Monkey Wrench Books. Perhaps not surprisingly, these are groups that tend to be led by younger people, who are drawing on long-standing radical ideas, updating as needed to fit a changing world. The organizers in this world that I know reject the ideology that comforts the dominant culture. The old folks who are useful in these endeavors I think also are willing to leave behind these chauvinistic stories about American greatness. So to openly challenge the American dream is to signal that we are not afraid to, number one, tell the truth and, number two, keep working in face of significant impediments. This kind of challenge speaks to those who are hungry for honest talk about the depth of our problems and are yearning to be part of a community that perseveres without illusions. That isn't a majority of the American population, maybe not yet even a significant minority, but those are the people, I think, who have the resolve that we need.

So back to the patriotism critique. Despite the popularity of those "Peace is Patriotic" bumper stickers, I have continued to offer my argument against the concept of patriotism. And whenever I spoke about it in a lecture, people tell me that it was helpful to hear that position articulated in public. Over and over, on this and other issues, I hear people saying that they've had such thoughts themselves but have felt isolated, and that hearing the critique in public shores up their sense that they are not crazy. Perhaps these kinds of more radical analyses don't change the course of existing movements in the moment, but I do think they help bolster those who are at the core of more radical movements that we need, and they do help us identify each other.

A second strategic consideration. Although a radical critique of the American dream isn't likely to land in *The New York Times*, any more than a radical critique of patriotism, I don't think we should ignore the ways we can use such arguments for outreach to liberal and sometimes even conservative communities. Once again let me give you an example from this question of patriotism. I have had conversations with conservative Christians, who are typically among the most hyperpatriotic Americans, in which I've challenged them to square that patriotism with their Christian faith. "Isn't patriotism simply a form of idolatry?" I ask. I can't claim to have converted large numbers to the anti-empire, anti-capitalist critique yet, but as the Evangelicals say, we sometimes make progress one by one from within, one by one from within, brothers and sisters. But framing questions in a way that forces people to see that conventional politics is at odds with their most

deeply held moral principles is a potentially effective strategy in some cases. It doesn't always work because we all know that humans, including all of us, are known for our ability to hold contradictory ideas at the same time. But I do think this is one resource in an organizer's toolkit.

So we might consider critiquing the American dream by contrasting it with another widely embraced idea: the Golden Rule, or the ethic of reciprocity, which says we should treat others as we would like to be treated. That principle shows up in virtually all religious teachings and secular philosophy. In Christianity Jesus phrased it this way in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew, chapter 7, verse 12: "So whatever you wish that someone would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets." One of the best known stories about the great Jewish scholar Hillel from the first century B.C.E. concerns a man who it was said challenged him to "teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." Hillel responded, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn it." This is echoed in the repeated biblical command in both the Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament to "love thy neighbor as thyself." In Islam one of Prophet Mohammed's central teachings was, "None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself." In secular Western philosophy, Kant's categorical imperative is a widely invoked touchstone: "Act only according to the maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it shall become a universal law."

On the surface the American dream of success for all appears to be an articulation of the Golden Rule, of equal opportunity for all. Yet, when we suggest that the two ideas are in fact in opposition, it might give us a chance to make the case that the dream is based on domination and therefore a violation of that core principle. We can ask people how they might reconcile a commitment to an ethic of reciprocity while endorsing a vision of society that leads to an unjust and unsustainable world. How can the least among us today, and our descendants tomorrow, knowing that we turned away from the moral commitments we claim to be most dear to us, ever forgive us. I think a critique of the American dream can open up that conversation.

Let's go back to this notion of the American dream as an epic or a tragedy. The American dream, of course, typically is illustrated with stories of the heroes who lived the dream. But the larger story of the American dream I think casts the U.S. itself as the hero on a global stage. The question we might ask, somewhat uncomfortably, is the United States an epic hero or a tragic one? Literature scholars argue over definitions of terms like "epic" and "tragedy," but I think in common usage an epic celebrates the deeds of a hero who is favored by and perhaps even descended from the gods. These heroes overcome adversity to do great things in the service of great causes.

Whatever else happens, epic heroes win. A tragic hero loses, but typically not because of an external force. The essence of tragedy is what Aristotle called *hamartha*, which is an error in judgment made because of some character flaw, such as *hubris*. That excessive pride of the protagonist becomes his downfall.

Although some traditions talk about the sin of pride, most of us would agree, probably, that taking some pride in ourselves is psychologically healthy. The problem is excessive pride, when we elevate ourselves and lose a sense of the equal value of others. I think this distinction between pride and excessive pride is crucial in dealing with the American dream, which people often understand in the context of their own hard work and sacrifice. People justifiably take pride, for example, in having worked to start a small business, perhaps, making it possible for their children to get a college education. That's one very common articulation of the American dream. Pride in our work turns to *hubris* when we believe that we are special for having worked, as if our work is somehow more ennobling than that of others, as if we have worked on a level playing field. When we fall into this kind of *hubris* individually, the consequences can be disastrous for us and maybe for those around us. When we fall into this kind of *hubris* as a nation, when we ignore the domination on which our dreams are based, the consequences are more dramatic. And when that nation is the wealthiest and most powerful in the world at a time in history when the high-energy, high-technology society is unraveling the fabric of the living world, the consequences are, in fact, life-threatening on a global scale.

When I say things like this, people often say, "Oh, don't worry. Empires have come and gone. Hell, other species have come and gone. Nothing to worry about. The world carries on." That's all true, but it's a disturbingly flippant response that glosses over two important considerations. Yes, it's true, empires come and go, but let us not forget that empires cause immense suffering as they are built and immense suffering as they decline. And, second, the level of human intervention into the larger world has never been on this scale in terms of any other species. So the collapse of an empire in this context poses, I think, very new risks. To toss off these questions is, I think, to abandon one's humanity.

To face all of this honestly, we need to recognize just how inadequate our existing ideas, projects, and institutions really are. Going back to Wes Jackson, the scientist I quoted earlier, he invoked a friend of his, the late geographer Dan Luten, when he said, "We, most Europeans, came as a poor people to a seemingly empty land that was rich in resources. We built our institutions with that perception of reality. Our political institutions, our educational institutions, our economic institutions, all built on that perception of reality. Yet in our time we have become rich people in an increasingly poor land that is filling up, and the institutions don't hold." Developing

new institutions is never easy, but I think it will be easier if we can abandon our epic dreams and start dealing with the tragic nature of our circumstances.

To begin wrapping up, I want to concentrate a bit more on this notion of the epic. Let's return to these words of the first American dreamer, our friend James Truslow Adams, who in his book, *Remember*, said, "The epic loses all its glory without the dream." Glory is about distinction, about claiming a special place. The American dream asserts such a place in history for the U.S., and from that vantage point U.S. domination seems justified. Yet the future, that is to say, if there is to be a future, depends on us being able to give up the illusion of being special and abandon the epic story of the United States.

I must say, it's tempting for me to end there, with those of us who might critique the domination/subordination dynamic at the heart of the American dream lecturing those American dreamers about how they must change. But I think we critics have dreams of our own to give up. We have our own epics of resistance, our own heroes who persevere against injustice in our counternarratives. Our rejection of the idea of the American dream seems to be absorbed into the dream itself, no matter how much we may object. How do we live in America and not dream? In other words, how do we persevere in a nightmare? Can we stay committed to radical politics without much hope for a happy ending? What if we were to succeed in our epic struggle to transcend the American dream but find that the American dream is just one small part of a larger tragedy of the modern human. What if the task is not simply to give up the dream of the United States as special but the dream of the human species as special? And what is the global forces set in motion during the high-energy, high-technology era are, in fact, beyond the point of no return?

Surrounded by big, majestic buildings and tiny, sophisticated electronic gadgets that were created through human cleverness, it's easy for us to believe we are smart enough to run a complex world. But we should never forget that cleverness is not wisdom and the ability to create does not guarantee that we can control the destruction we have unleashed. It may be that no matter what the fate of the American dream, there is no way to rewrite this larger epic, that too much of the tragedy has already been played out.

But don't worry, there's good news. We'll end with some good news. While tragic heroes need an unhappy fate, a community can learn from the protagonist's fall. Even tragic heroes can, at the end, celebrate the dignity of the human spirit in their own failure. That may, in fact, be the task of Americans, to recognize that we can't reverse course in time to prevent our ultimate failure but that in this time remaining we can recognize our own *hamartha*, we can name our own *hubris* and excessive pride, we can do what we can do to undo the damage. That may be the

one last chance for the United States to be truly heroic, for us to learn to leave the stage gracefully. Thank you.

Q&A

It's a good point. You're pointing out that people within these institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank, are not stupid. They have a whole lot of information at their disposal and they understand, maybe not presented in the same way I would, but understand much of what we're talking about. So why don't they change? I quoted James Wolfenson, a former president of the World Bank. But, remember, I said these were remarks he made as he was leaving. So when folks in those kinds of institutions tell the truth, it is, in fact, often when they are leaving. That reminds us that when they are in positions of power, they are serving the institutions. If they don't serve the institutions, they wouldn't be in those positions. Critical comments and deep self-reflection tend to come when their pensions are secure and they are moving on.

Which reminds us that it's not the individuals, it's the nature of the system. So what are institutions like the World Bank and the IMF set up to do? They're set up not to engage us in critical self-reflection. They're set up precisely to maintain the system as it exists, both the system that governs the distribution of wealth within the human family, that is, they're created to keep the First World first, and they're not set up to critique the system of domination of ecosystems through which that wealth is extracted. So it would be kind of unusual if people working in systems set up to perpetuate something would magically turn. For instance, I work at the University of Texas. It would be as if all of a sudden administrators started caring about education. Why would you expect that? They care about what they care about, which is money and football. Sometimes they throw a bone to those of us who teach. That's the nature of these institutions. I think maybe deeper in your question is, the evidence is starting to pile up, especially about the health of the ecosphere. You don't have to be a climate scientist, you don't have to be an ecologist, you don't even really have to know much beyond the headlines to know that we are facing a really serious set of crises, multiple crises. Here I think there is a psychological problem. And it's not just of the leadership; it's of all of us. We're talking about the fact that the entire system in which we live—whether we're rich or poor, the entire system in which we all live is fundamentally unsustainable. How do 7 billion people in the world start living differently? How do you start to imagine that? I don't have a glib answer for that. The social dislocation and the calamities that are likely to come between today and whatever new organization of the human species we find I think kind of dwarf our moral

imagination. And part of the reason we don't engage it is because our moral imaginations don't know how to.

It's a very good point and something that needs to be taken quite seriously. To restate the question and comment, certainly many immigrants come to the U.S. coming from places where the minimal sort of material success that we might take for granted here is hard to achieve and having a chance to achieve that here. I don't denigrate that. But I think that to leave that as the American dream and to leave that narrative of the dream uncritiqued is dangerous. The first part of it is, why are people coming to the U.S. to achieve the good life? Are Mexican immigrants, whether documented or not, coming because they hate Mexico, because Mexico is an inherently inferior place? No. They're being driven to the U.S. because the economic conditions in a country like Mexico, very much conditioned on decisions made in Washington in New York, are driving them here. So coming to achieve the American dream is in part necessary because the American dream has destroyed the possibility of a Mexican dream. We've got to sort of keep that front and center.

Beyond that, whatever the case may be, people coming to achieve that kind of material success in the U.S. are adding to the long-term problem. Maybe as an analogy, imagine there is a train steaming forward and the dining car is well stocked, it's nice and warm. Everybody wants to get on the train. I can't blame you. You're sitting by the side of the road, the train comes by, you want to get on. The problem is, the train is on a set of tracks that are heading to the cliff. Independent of how many people get on, that train is going over the cliff. That's the other reality. And as long as these American-dream narratives are so deeply set in place, I think it's harder to deal with these kinds of things honestly, both, again, the questions that revolve around social justice and the questions that revolve around ecological sustainability. I'm not arguing that we mock or denigrate those people who embrace it. I'm arguing that we engage in a conversation that tries to raise these critical questions.

To sort of encapsulate, we're seeing large numbers of people in the U.S. who were raised with the expectation that the material part of the dream especially would be available. The story is often told that every generation believed that their children were going to have more and easier access to more than they had had. All of a sudden that is no longer the case. So what happens? As you say, what happens is rather predictable. In a culture with no consistent left organizations, ideology, and traditions, that anger and resentment at elites who have created a system that no longer serves the needs of ordinary people are not likely to be directed into a deep left critique of capitalism and empire. If the institutions aren't there, the ideology isn't there, why would one expect people to automatically

move to what we believe to be the correct left interpretation? Where will they go? They'll go to the place where the ideology is well developed and the institutions exist and are well funded, which is a right-wing critique.

That in some ways is very depressing. But I think we also have to ask the question, how long can that continue? How long can relatively elite right-wing forces sell to a population that they should get to be more right-wing to solve their problems, when it is, in fact, the right-wing ideology that is the basis for the problems? How long that can continue? Well, in a well-developed propaganda system, that we have in the U.S.—propaganda meaning educational institutions, media institutions, and often the church—that can go on for quite some time. What scares me is that even if eventually we imagine that we can turn the tide, how long do we have to really make serious inroads?

I think what this brings up is the question of fascism. Throughout most of my time of being politically active, I've listened to people, usually younger people, angry for justifiable reasons, describe the U.S. as a fascist society. You know what I'm talking about. "The U.S. is a fascist state, man. The U.S. is a police state, man." Guess what? It's not. The U.S. is not a fascist state and it's not a police state. If you have doubts, call my friend from Turkey who used to be a left labor organizer in Turkey when it really was a fascist police state. I digress. She said this at a meeting we had once. Some guy got up and started railing on about the U.S. being a police state. And she said, "Excuse me, sir. I've lived in a police state. This isn't one." It doesn't mean that the police power of the country isn't used to target specific people. Of course it is. That's why the jails are disproportionately black and brown. But we are not a fascist state, not in any way in which fascism is a meaningful term in political science.

I would argue over and over again, we live in a liberal, pluralist, capitalist democracy which is very good at social control. But that form of social control is very different from fascism. It doesn't mean it's a good situation. It means it's different. And when you conflate the two, I think you lose analytic power and therefore you lose any hopes of making inroads in the population.

All that said, I'm worried about the United States turning fascist. I don't think it is, but I think that that possibility is not inconceivable. I think we do have to think about that. That means that our organizing has to constantly—even though I said I don't think this is a mass-movement moment, I think that we do have to start wherever we can connecting to people.

The question—this is a good place to conclude, I think, because it's so central—how can we diminish the influence of money, which means the influence of concentrated wealth, on politics? You often hear that a Supreme Court decision or a law affects corporate and union contributions, which assumes that these are

equivalent, which, of course, they're not. What we're talking about is concentrated wealth and the way it undermines democracy. Concentrated wealth leads to a disruption of the democratic potential of a society. That's quite clear. This is one of those subjects that I think leads to a really healthy conversation about the fundamental nature of the economic system. The problem is not that we have this great capitalist economy and it's been hijacked somehow. You often here this "hijacked" narrative. This system was always designed to concentrate wealth and therefore concentrate power. The form in which it does it shifts as movements try to resist and then they're beaten back. But the problem is the nature of the capitalist economic system and the predominant form within which that economic activity goes forward—the corporation.

The particular craziness of it right now, on which there's a lot of attention, is the legal decisions that have led over the past century or so to the American legal system treating corporations as if they were persons in various matters, including matters of freedom of expression. Well, every time I've ever asked an audience, whether it's a class or a public audience, whether they think corporations are in any meaningful sense persons, everybody laughs. No, that's crazy. We're persons, we're people. Those corporations, whether they're the corporations we work for or the ones we've had to buy goods from, those aren't people in any meaningful sense. They're soulless, they're amoral by definition. So trying to latch on to that I think is important. Not because the corporation itself is the problem but because the corporation in a capitalist economy is the problem. And by entering into the discussion about the nature of corporate persons, we can lead to a larger and more fruitful discussion of the underlying basis of the economy and the way it does and always will undermine democracy.

This is a practical rhetorical thing. I always say, we have political equality in the U.S., correct? One person, one vote. Free expression, freedom of association, correct? Right? Absolutely right. That means that Bill Gates and I are political equals. That's true. Because when Bill Gates goes into the voting booth, how many times does he pull the lever? Once. I go in, I pull it once. I have freedom of speech, Bill Gates has freedom of speech. If I want to start a new political party, is anybody going to stop me? No. If Bill Gates wants to, is anybody going to stop him? No. Bill Gates and I are political equals, correct?

You put it that way and everybody is snickering, and then at some point they break into laughter. Because it's a ludicrous proposition that Bill Gates and I are political equals. Because everyone understands that Bill Gates has at his disposal financial resources that dwarf that not only of me but everybody in this room, our extended families, and everybody we've ever known in our lives. And therefore, that concentrated wealth is going to affect the distribution of power.

You cannot have a democracy based on the idea of political power that is distributed in an economic system in which wealth is concentrated. That doesn't take a Ph.D. in economics or political science. That just takes common sense. And the more times we can stand up in front of people or sit down with people at dinner and make these basic points and then open up discussion on what it will take to really create a democratic culture on the idea that it's only a truly democratic culture that's going to make it possible to work for social justice and ecological sustainability, then at least we have the hope of moving forward.

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A stylized, bold, serif logo consisting of the letters 'A' and 'R' intertwined. The 'A' is on the left and the 'R' is on the right, with their stems overlapping.