

World Gone Cuckoo



by Theodore Dalrymple

Sigmund Freud's notion of a death instinct always seemed preposterous to me, but now I am not so sure. At any rate, there seems to exist a death wish, and in the Western world it has become almost a matter of mass hysteria. It takes various forms, each with its own rationalization. Man, after all, is not the rational animal, but the rationalizing animal.

One of the most obvious forms of the death wish is the belief that it is morally wrong to have children. This supposed wrongness is not conditional, for example, on a person's ability or otherwise to support a child or children economically, or because conditions are now simply too difficult for parents, what with both of them having to go out to work to make ends meet, the price of child care, and so forth. No; even if conditions were optimal, with no financial

or other obstacles, it would be wrong to bring children into the world because they would consume resources and make it even more difficult for the birds and the bees.

I do not wish by this to deny that there are great environmental problems. I am by no means a keen naturalist or observer of nature, but even I have noticed that, since my childhood, the number of songbirds has declined enormously in my country, and I regret it. It is quite a number of years since I have seen a song thrush, though in my childhood they were common enough even in city gardens. In the past couple of decades, the number of cuckoos has declined by 65 percent, and it is possible that one of the first poems in the recognizably English language, "The Cuckoo Song," will be meaningless to people in a generation or two. The cuckoo—what on earth is that?

The cuckoo has declined in numbers because the birds it parasitizes by laying its eggs in their nest has also declined, each cuckoo specializing genetically in parasitizing a particular species of bird, and therefore not being adaptable to a decline in that species of bird. And the reason the number of the parasitized birds has declined is that the numbers of insects that are their food have declined. The numbers of insects have declined because of the use of insecticides.

It seems to me, then, that there is a genuine and serious problem here, and not merely an aesthetic one, given the importance to human life of pollinating insects.

This is not quite the same, however, as saying that one must do one's bit for the extinction of humanity in order to save the cuckoo or the pollinating insects. Maybe it is unduly anthropocentric of me, but I don't care very much about the survival of cuckoos in a world in which there would be no humans to hear them.

Of course, those who think it is immoral for them to have any children because that is the only way they can think of saving the insects might reply that they do not demand that *everyone* should have no children, that is to say that no one should have any children. In fact, they are aware that *some* people will continue to have children whatever they say or do. They might even say that *their* children, were they ever to have them, would consume a disproportionate share of the world's resources and therefore add more to the pollution of the world than, say, a baby, or many babies, born in Southern Sudan.

This seems to me a very dismal attitude, and underlying it is a dislike of human life as he who holds this attitude has lived it. He has been born into a civilization, he thinks, in which he sees nothing good, worth continuing, or contributing toward. For him, it would have been better if it had never existed. And this amounts to a death wish, not merely personal but civilizational.

Is this a sincere belief, or is it rationalization for something else, perhaps an egocentric obsession with his own life, pleasures, and activities, that he sees a child as an unwelcome obstacle to its continuation, a child being to him like an irritatingly prolonged telephone call while he is trying to concentrate on something else?

It scarcely matters whether it is a sincerely held belief or moral exhibitionism. If it is acted upon, the result will be the same.

There are other manifestations of the civilizational death wish, indeed there are hundreds of them, large and small. The pulling down of statues, the revamping or even destruction of museums, the rewriting of history (not in the sense that it is always rewritten in the light of new research, but in the desire to reach and impose a politically useful conclusion), the censoring of literature, the denigration of cultural

achievements, and so forth, are all signs of a death wish. No civilization can long survive a complete loss of confidence, all the less so if there are external enemies and real dangers threatening it.

Those whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make Woke. We have countries facing severe economic and other problems, several of them conceivably catastrophic in outcome, whose intelligentsia and an increasing proportion of whose political class concern themselves with pseudo-questions such as whether—to put it graphically—it is right for a male boxer to claim to change his sex to female and subsequently beat the living daylights out of a woman. Only people who hate civilization in general, and their own in particular, could possibly think this a real question, or answer in the affirmative.

Mr. Charles Norman, of this august publication, kindly drew my attention to a case in France (usually somewhat in the rear guard of Anglo-American stupidity), in which a school's teaching staff decided that, henceforth, there would be no Mother's or Father's Day—bogus celebrations, actually—but only Loved Ones' Day, in essence because one, or at least teachers, can't tell these days how babies are made. The staff must have known that they were stirring up a hornets' nest, I think to distract from the fact that education standards have fallen drastically in the past few decades, itself due to the death wish of Western civilization.

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