

The Decline and Fall of Everything

John Zerzan
Paula Zerzan

1976

The landscape of capitalism is a global one, existing everywhere with only minor variations. But this universal reign of the paycheck and the price-tag is approaching a state of crisis, becoming noticeable to all but those whose idea of politics excludes everyday reality.

Naturally enough, this crisis of the spirit, this nearing collapse of daily routine, is reaching its most acute forms thus far in America, capital's most advanced arena.

Feelings of cynicism, powerlessness and desperate boredom no longer allow easy distraction; we know that an upside-down world forces us to remain onlookers in our own lives, and the social fact of this realization is fast sending the prevailing values to ashes.

The magnitude of alienation is arriving at a critical point, threatening to swamp the foundations of our own pacification.

In 1974 the Hudson Institute published Overholt and Kahn's *Perceptions of the Quality of Life*, which found that "polls show enormously widespread doubt among American citizens regarding America's most basic governmental and private institutions." From the same semi-governmental think tank, came Barry Smernoff's *Images of Future American Society*, with its similar verdict as to "our worsening cultural malaise" and "spreading alienation."

Also in '74 appeared a Max Lerner article in *Foreign Affairs* reporting a pervasive sense of "being at the end of the tether, a mordant feeling of disintegration and decay."

The roots of this sense of 'disintegration and decay' were not hard to locate: their reflection was available by a glance at a newsstand's offerings. The June 24, 1974 *U.S. News and World Report* carried "Vandalism: a Billion Dollars a Year and Getting Worse," and their November 25 issue bemoaned the lowest Fall election participation in 30 years with "The Real Loser: Voter turnout." E.R. Ramey's "Boredom: The Most Prevalent American Disease" discussed the fairly obvious in the November *Harper's*. Another side of this malaise was provided in December by the *Los Angeles Times* with the disclosure that arson had more than tripled in the past ten years.

The January 18, 1975 *New Republic* offered further commentary on the preceding November's extremely low voter turnout in the aptly titled "Politics as Spectator Sport." The editor noted that growing numbers are convinced that voting doesn't affect their lives, and warned gravely that this attitude points clearly in the direction of "goodbye to domestic tranquillity."

"Loneliness is the most insidious condition in modern society," concluded USC's Dr. John Milner in April, the same month that a Senate Sub-committee on Juvenile Delinquency report gave graphic testimony to the fruits of this emptiness and alienation.. The 18-month study found that violence in public schools has reached "a crisis level that seriously threatens the schools' educational mission," and that the annual cost of vandalism is equal to the "entire annual investment for textbooks," to quote the April 10, 1975 *New York Times*.

In June, a study group of the World Health Organization noted the growing incidence of suicide among children under 10 years of age. This remarkable news was independently disclosed during the same month by the

director of the National Poison Center network, Dr. Richard Moriarity, who expressed shock at “the number of kids who are thinking about suicide at age 7 and 10.”

In April, Dr. Darold Treffert had said that “the number of teenage suicides in the United States has tripled in the last decade, to an estimated 30 a day, with more than half the patients in the nation’s psychiatric hospitals under age 21.” Treffert, of Wisconsin’s Mental Health Institute, blamed the hoax of the “American fairy tale,” and observed that millions are plagued throughout their lives by “a gnawing emptiness or meaningless expressed not as a fear of what may happen to them, but rather as a fear that nothing will happen to them.”

A part of the teenage suicide phenomenon is a bizarre but increasingly prevalent psychomatic disease, anorexia nervosa. Called the “golden girl disease,” very popular, bright teenage girls fall victim to a total apathy in which they simply starve themselves to death.

The July 8 *Wall Street Journal* reported that auto workers were staying home from work in at least the same very high numbers as they did two years before, despite the massive recession lay-offs in auto.

The Burlington Northern Railroad’s poll of thousands of employees (*Wall Street Journal*, July 15) proved to be another surprise to management. It found that workers with a favorable attitude toward the union also have a favorable attitude toward the boss, and that negative feelings about the two are also paired. And on July 22 it was announced that employer orders for lie detectors to be used on workers were up 25% in 1975, though more than a dozen states bar their use as a condition of employment.

A further note for the month on social attitudes was Sylvia Porter’s financial column for July 30. It reported on “the soaring student loan default rate,” with default claim figures seen “rising in a perpendicular line” as pay-back obligations are ignored.

A national poll done for the Peoples Bicentennial Commission by Hart Research Associates in August revealed that more than half of the American people believe that both political parties are dominated by big business and only 22% believe that the capitalist system has not yet reached its peak. The poll was widely reported, with headlines such as, “Poll Finds ‘Startling’ Loss of Faith in Capitalism,” and “Public is Turning Against Capitalism.”

Also in August, the wildcat strike of 80,000 miners in several states was an event of significance, especially for its anti-union militancy. It was directed at the union’s collusion with management and the United Mine Workers Union was clearly the key to breaking the illegal strike. As miners skirmished with police, defied court orders, and attacked the UMW District 17 headquarters in Charlestown, West Virginia, the union came out very strongly and openly against its own members.

An extremely harsh disciplinary program was established after the strike to defend the union and appease the coal operators. Over 1,000 miners’ wildcats were reported in 1973, for example, and the new reform leadership of the UMW seems as powerless as the earlier corrupt leaders to contain the workers.

September saw what has become a commonplace, articles about kids versus the schools. Feature stories abounded, such as the September 3 *San Francisco Examiner* story on children, often the very brightest, “who develop an abnormal hatred of school.” Herbert Hendin’s *The Age of Sensation* was widely reviewed in the fall, with its datum that the suicide rate of the young has risen over 250% in the past 20 years, and its prediction of increased frustration and rebellion by youth.

By September 21, the National Association of Mental Health disclosed that depression is rapidly gaining on schizophrenia as the nation’s number one mental health problem. Their survey maintained that 15% of Americans aged 18 to 74 suffer symptoms of serious depression.

The September *Seventeen* (“Young America’s Favorite Magazine”) featured Lester Davis’s “Break-down, A Teenage Case Study,” which also publicized five emotional health danger signals, such as “undue and prolonged” anxiety and despair. An average American amount of anxiety or despair is apparently seen by some as acceptable these days.

Ed and Jovita Addeo’s *Why Our Children Drink* was published in October and brought to light remarkable figures on heavy and desperate drinking by kids. Their investigations found fifth graders coming to school drunk, almost half the students of one seemingly typical California high school drunk in school, almost 10,000 teenage alcoholics receiving treatment in Los Angeles, and similar facts.

And on and on. I’m sure the reader can bring to mind much of the same— and without recourse to the printed page. From the multiplication of mass murders, to the ‘acceleration of an almost frenzied tourism, to the revolt

against work, to the dying and decomposition of New York (our most 'advanced' urban space), to the virtual end of voting by those under forty, to a desensitized sexuality and growing isolation, to practically every line of poetry written today.

A paragraph of a recent *San Francisco Chronicle* review by Thomas Albright begins, "In a world where all of us share the same basic futility..." And no one can take exception to the phrase; the fact is too obvious to try to deny.

A break-up of the deepest sort is nearing because more and more people refuse to tolerate merely surviving. Destruction and even self-destruction are preferred to the impossibility of living. *Fortune*, capital's leading monthly, designated April '75 its Special Bicentennial Issue, featuring Daniel Bell's "Revolution of Rising Entitlements" article. Bell declared that "unlimited wants" are threatening the system. An "equality of results" is being demanded, as human desires are being taken seriously in society.

People are starting to want everything, and thus the last part of his offering, "Recognizing the Limits of Power;" counsels our masters to make explicit the limits of capitalism. It's time to tell everyone that we can't expect to become happy!

But at the same time, those who serve the commodity are still trying to keep the world of things the master of the human world by cashing in on exactly the desires which have become so dangerous.

It's "Mustang II, Boredom zero!" "Light up a Muriel and light up your life!" "Harley-Davidson—the freedom machine!" "Old Smuggler's Scotch—for those who refuse to compromise," ad nauseum.

They can't help but know what everyone wants: freedom, authenticity, adventure; and so they must attempt to offer more and more—in terms of what can only be seen as less and less.

The need for total revolution becomes clearer, and a seemingly unavoidable nihilism is advancing as its prelude.

fifth Estate

John Zerzan
Paula Zerzan
The Decline and Fall of Everything
1976

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/268-january-1976/decline-fall-everything>
Fifth Estate #268, January, 1976

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net