

A REPLY ISN'T ALWAYS AN ANSWER

By Michael Ventura

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Two recent columns, “Trickle-Down Civilization” and “The Catch of All Catches,” have drawn many letters both to the editor and to me privately – far more than we have space to print. But I’ll attempt to answer some of the questions they raise.

Many readers assumed that recording what I believe to be the murderous cost of our civilization was just a guilt trip – on myself and on them. My question is: Why do you equate grief and shame with guilt?

To feel grief at the historical moment that surrounds you, and even to feel shame at the misery from which, through no fault of your own, you can’t help but profit – is this guilt? Isn’t “guilt” to take the entire responsibility upon yourself (which is madness) and then to allow yourself to be paralyzed by that feeling (which is a cop-out)? I’m frankly suspicious of people who cannot tolerate the grief and shame of being part of this society without immediately sliding into states of guilt, or accusing others of doing so – for, by using the excuse of rejecting guilt, they give themselves a reason for failing to extend their feelings, at least for long, to anything outside their own lives. I think this is the fundamental mechanism that makes for our affluent complacency (especially among the well-educated).

To be open to the grief, and even to the shame, of what our history has cost others, and what our standard of living *is* costing them even as we speak – is to take the crucial step of severing one’s allegiance, not to civilization as an ideal, but to *this* civilization. To stop trying to “improve” it and to be willing to discard it, to go beyond it entirely.

In a column called “A Dance Among the Ruins” (May 1991), I wrote, “There is a difference between helping this society survive and helping humanity survive. We have to learn that difference. Society is always and merely a form. We are the content. This society is dispensable. We are not.”

It’s worth repeating: people who equate a sense of *historical* grief and shame with guilt need to ask themselves if, at bottom, they aren’t merely trying to defend their affluence.

Many readers argued with my sense of history, my grasp of facts. Well ... both are fallible. But in fairness to myself as well as to them, history is swampy ground. All scholarship is, at bottom, a form of fiction: a *selection* of sets of facts from among the infinity of facts. You read what you read, I read what I read, and we believe and select what suits our temperaments. Both we and our sources are *always* not quite right, and covering for it. In this sense, the past is ultimately a construct of the present. I don’t know a way out of this dilemma.

For instance, one reader attacked my contention, “European pillage [of the Americas and Africa] codified the Renaissance.” She claimed, “The Renaissance peaked well before Columbus’ first voyage.” Depends on who you read. In an article for *Time* magazine, an outfit with access to data bases beyond those available to the *L.A. Weekly*, John Elson wrote:

“Humanity’s instinct for order wants precise timetables for great events. When, for example, did the Renaissance begin? Charles Van Doren, in *A History of Knowledge*,

argues for 1304; that was the birth year of poet Francesco Petrarch, whose life and work epitomized the revival of classical learning in Italy. Many other historians favor 1453, the year of Constantinople's fall."

So much for pinpoint accuracy. Also in this case, I said "codified." China and the Islamic world had periods very like our Western Renaissance that were obliterated from historical effect by later periods of reaction. In Europe, the Inquisition tried to wipe out the Renaissance but couldn't, partly because of the newly invented printing press and mostly because of the economic and cultural activity generated by the Conquest.

Others said I was idealizing non-Western tribal cultures – an easy impression to get if you read only "The Catch of All Catches." But in the preceding column, "Trickle-Down Civilization," I wrote: [The non-Western world] wasn't Eden. Despite what ecologists say, to be balanced with nature does *not* equate with sanity. In Africa, for instance, as well as in most of the Americas, a female was the possession of her father or her husband, to be bought, sold or traded . . . People warred with their neighbors everywhere, even in the most idyllic settings where there was no economic excuse. They gossiped. Gypped. Cooked up new atrocities to inflict when they got tired of the old ones. Just like us. It wasn't Eden."

But I claimed that the non-"civilized" peoples did not overpopulate and were in an essential, self-correcting harmony with nature. In "Trickle-Down Civilization," I noted that this didn't include China and India, which had civilizations on a Western scale, though different in style. Their civilizations, like ours, depended on oppression, and oppression tends to create massive overpopulation. But several well-informed readers pointed out that there were cases of overpopulation and destruction of resources in tribal life as well.

It's a matter of scale, and of what one means by harmony. When the Anasazi of the American Southwest, for instance, stripped the area of its forests and had to scatter (something I discussed in *Shadow Dancing in the USA*, a collection of essays published in 1985) – how does that relate to what we're doing? Several hundred Anasazi turn into many thousands over a few centuries and denude an area essentially within walking distance – for the Anasazi had no horses and no wheel. It's an upheaval for *them*. They have a famine and they scatter, migrate. Their society collapses, or, rather, changes into the tribal life that followed. The scattered smaller groups walk to areas that can support them; the area they left achieves a new, if different, natural balance.

That's what I meant by "self-correcting."

This cannot be compared to our conscious destruction, on a continental scale, of the ability to sustain life. Scale makes all the difference. When, as in North America, the topsoil is being overused and eroded while the water tables are being drained, the possibility for self-correction (which is the essence of harmony) is itself being destroyed. That is unprecedented. Especially for a people that has the necessary knowledge not to behave this way. Surely, in the face of such things, analogies to local civilizations such as that of the Anasazi are beside the point.

And when we speak of overpopulation that results in hundreds of millions of human beings living in shantytowns that make the worst slums in America look like luxury, in a population that cannot migrate because there's no place left to migrate to – aren't we speaking of a qualitative different phenomenon than a few too many Anasazi?

Again, confronting such analogies, I think we are dealing with the attempts of the well-educated to fog their own history and deny their own responsibility – two essential conceptual steps to the physical protection of their affluence.

Then there was Mr. Joshua Stern, who accused me of advocating “a return to savagery.” To have savagery one must have savages, so I wonder which savages Mr. Stern was referring to.

The Navajo or the Yoruba? The Inca or the Masai? Australian “aboriginals,” with the longest continuous culture on record (some 40,000 years), or the Iroquois, from whom the framers of our Constitution borrowed several central concepts?

Of course there’s no going back to tribal life. And, as I said above, tribal people were, in essence, very much like us. But surely in the century of Dresden and Auschwitz, of Agent Orange and Uzis, of . . . all the rest, all that you know so well – we have no need to “return” to savagery. We never left.

Others pointed out our advances in medicine, in science, in the creation of “leisure time,” all the benefits of technology, as justifications and defenses of our history, our civilization – which argument, I confess, baffles me. I never stop being amazed that we, who live in the most dangerous century we know about, persist in citing the *cause* of that danger (industrial technology) as its justification. I swear, I just don’t get it.

Finally, and most offensively, there were the New Age letters. One went like this: “Your recent political columns lead me to believe that you aren’t integrating your spiritual mind with your political mind . . . there was a harmonic convergence during which enough enlightened people focused enough high-frequency energy to lift the planet into a higher vibratory rate, thereby veering us out of the path of nuclear holocaust and, based on no known logical political reasoning, put an end to the Cold War.”

I thought the end of the Cold War had something to do with all those folks in Eastern Europe and Russia and China going out into the street unarmed and facing down all those people with guns – sometimes with success and sometimes not, but in enough numbers and with enough outrageous passion that the world changed. For a few New Agers who were never in any danger to take credit for that is, frankly, obscene.

I don’t mean that we can’t aid each other in invisible ways. We do. Our thoughts, our longings – yes, and our prayers – go far, I believe. Nevertheless, that’s different from standing in front of a tank in Tian An Men Square.

This bears repeating in another key: sitting in your room feeling good about yourself is not the same as risking everything. And few important changes come, on the political *or* the personal plane, unless one is willing to risk everything.

If that writer were one of the tens of millions starving and filthy in shantytowns our affluence has created, would she still be so sure that this is a New Age? The nuclear holocaust threatens less now – but how many children on our streets are getting shot every day? If we don’t temper our spirituality with eyes open to their suffering, how can those surviving children trust us?

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