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Ibsen Revitalized and Updated

I awoke this morning with Ibsen's "Enemy of the People" (1882) tugging at the back of my mind because I had been puzzling earlier over the possibilities of interpreting the phrase, "elephant in the room," frequently heard among radicals in denoting the outrageous expenditures in the national budget devoted to intervention, nuclear and conventional armaments, research and development focused on the promotion of war, and, in general, an inflated militarism, all at the expense of meeting domestic needs, as in spending on infrastructure, job creation, pollution control, health care, mortgage relief, and halting the steady diminution in the scope and efficacy of the social safety net, each of which is held hostage to the all-pervasive vacuuming of the society's resources into the gaping maw of America's hegemonic pretensions and its will to power. Although by this reckoning, the military-factor *is* the elephant in the room, honesty compels one to admit that even without its overarching presence, as the cesspit for dumping national resources of wealth so as to prevent the formation of a vital public sector, America's ideological resistance to achieving the purposes of the social welfare, outside of a strict capitalistic interpretation and framework, as in contrast, say, to the creation of a single-payer health insurance system, still would hardly be realizable, given the hostility to all things *public*, thus making militarism preferable to, and the logical antidote for warding off, presumed socialism. (As I will point out, militarism is ancillary to capitalism, which I take to be the real elephant in the room.)

Remaining with current radical usage, i.e., militarism broadly conceived, to illustrate the psychological processes involved, one finds that the elephant in the room is of such gargantuan proportions that, by occupying the individual's attention or mental space, its enormity tends to crowd out all else, making it so conspicuous as finally to become inconspicuous, to be taken for granted, no longer considered, a *given* of the seemingly permanent mindset of the individual. One moves around the elephant, as paradoxically, its size renders it invisible. Radicals who are still observant complain about this omission, specifically, that the military budget and the actual operations become no longer subject to

opposition or critical scrutiny. Size in this case induces a certain numbness or ennui. But what must also be mentioned about our elephant is that size conveys, beyond invisibility, the sense of *invincibility*, which is far more dangerous to independent mental awareness. For the sheer preponderance of the military-factor in American life makes it an intimidating force (the more so because remaining largely unacknowledged), thereby inducing not simply numbness but rather the individual's overriding feeling (still more unconscious than recognized) of powerlessness, fostering character traits of complicity, complaisance, ultimately, categorical denial of its very existence—invincible
and
invisible, yet, by this point in what might be called the breakdown of the personality, or simply, ego-loss, in the face of organized, institutionalized, authorized
might
, also its inevitableness, as a corollary to what is invisible and invincible.

Psychological impoverishment follows like the night the day. The individual stands alone in a political culture notorious for its discouragement of solidarity-bonds, let alone class consciousness, as he/she, practically atomized by institutional design, has to encounter the weight of seemingly impersonal social forces, armed with the law (among other instruments), arrayed in solid phalanx against the dissident or, now, whistleblower. The “elephant in the room” here takes on greater significance because of mounting pressures to deny its existence. Its presence is protection against discovery, which means that in order to avoid the unthinkable—frequently the secret hidden in the elephant's identity and function, for the individual's psyche, is thinly-disguised barbarity—requires one to resort to obfuscatory strategies, as needed, to avoid the confrontation with reality, an unwillingness which is perfectly understandable when the particular reality, America, today, if revealed (Snowden, literally *today*), calls into question the nation's democratic foundations, structure of government, philosophic heritage of freedom, legal and constitutional principles: Exceptionalism therefore turned upside down, leaving an exceptionalism of a quite different character—one of reaction, force, amoral international practice geared to unilateral political-economic-ideological dominance of the global system. Thus, as I wrestled with the phrase, “elephant in the room,” I was struck by how
evil

(I use the term not in its theological, but rather, common-sense application, causing suffering, etc.) induces both fascination and passivity, the first, an attraction to, and willingness to submit before, power in its many manifestations (e.g., military, political, economic) and the powerful, and the latter, a still deeper psychological characteristic, call it Thanatos, in the face of overwhelming institutional-cultural pressures, practically reaching to the instinctual level, demanding self-pacification of the individual made to stand face-to-face to Leviathan.

Militarism, however, is not alone in humbling the individual to Lilliputian size; it requires an entire societal configuration, composed of interdependent factors, to reduce the human being

to stomaching the abuses of power while looking the other way. If history teaches us anything, it is that civilization has its dirty secrets, which are generally associated with exploitation, class dominance, and repression, for what else is there in plotting the ascent of ruling groups or the construction of class-arranged hierarchical social systems, let alone the process of primitive accumulation at the formative stage of capitalism, as delineated by Marx? Revealing these secrets is a serious matter, indeed, mind-boggling, for those nurtured on a political culture of patriotism, because such revelation blows the lid off our own defenses and urge to accommodate to power, and equally, if revealed to all, and not only the victims, blows the whistle on the particular systemic mechanisms of power (which may vary from one society to another) constructed for the successful functioning of a basic power-relationship and its political-cultural maintenance and support. Even ruling groups have to believe in their superiority, prerogatives, and right to rule, or at least give the appearance of entitlement in that regard, lest they encourage resistance by betraying a lack of confidence.

As a first approximation, I suggest that militarism (and the use of military force) is the “elephant in the room” in America, the concretization of power seeping down into the collective unconscious drawing everyone together into a cohesive whole, making for a residual *fear* of the intimidatory force at the societal core which must be psychologically appeased, otherwise risking one’s isolation from the community and a crushing loss of identity. Ibsen early and brilliantly describes the collective mentality that fashions conformity into a state of political acquiescence, as here, in covering up the secret of the contaminated public baths, on which the town based its economic prosperity, health-giving reputation, and the prestige of its leaders, a secret, then, to be kept on pain of moral—and economic—bankruptcy should it be revealed, therefore one requiring self-suppression both of moral choice and realism itself. This abdication of reason, truth, political consciousness, is an invitation to a demiurgic Thanatos, permeating society with an implicit death-wish when human autonomy has been surrendered on the altar of power.

Indeed, a militarism-centered social order almost by implication courts disaster, its life-affirming energies objectively (yet probably unconsciously) thwarted as the whole of the welfare sector becomes proportionately degraded to finance the death-dealing armaments held necessary as a protective shield against the putative enemy. Projection plays a part here: because militarism bespeaks the nation’s own integral aggressiveness, obviating the stigma requires imputing the phenomenon to others, as if to say, outside exigencies or threats requires *us*, in the effort to preserve our own freedom, to respond in kind, only—in the name of democracy—on a grander scale. Thanatos hovers like a dark cloud over the mental landscape of a society that commits to expansion, hegemony, ideological and cultural superiority, all of which have been interlaced with ethnocentrism, itself a unifying agency for the three, and in its own right honing them into a cult of strength which seeks out the presumed nobility of war. Aside from the obvious utility of making war a surrogate for social reform at home, and the permanent state of war (the Obama-Brennan doctrine that has been enunciated, among the coterie of national-security advisers, to rationalize the armed drone campaign, featuring constantly revised hit lists to

ensure longevity and continuity of the program) the locus for habituating the people to an acceptance of security as the chief, if not exclusive, function of the State, the disposition to think in terms of war, intervention, militarism, is informed by an inward irresistible allure of inflicting as well as feeling pain. Welcome America, to sadomasochism in full throttle, part and parcel of the self-chosen militaristic framework, the collective death-wish always at the perimeter.

Step-by-step, we see looming in the Ibsenian revelation the psychodynamics of fear, fear of dissent, on the conscious plane, fear of disclosure, cowardice, but mostly, the participation in a lie, on the unconscious plane, leading the individual, who is lacking the resources of moral courage and the spirit of confrontation, to deliquescing into a pool of lethargy, or more apt, passiveness. American political life exalts compromise (the ideological dodge for enforcing the status quo), which, in this discussion, refers to the attitude of going-along: condoning war crimes—not even perceived as such—in the name of the National- Security State, likewise the commission of assassination authorized at the top levels of government, and of course the defense budget, which dwarfs all social-welfare expenditures and leaves the people to fend for themselves in a deteriorating state. The ruling groups—political, economic, military, singly and conjoined—could not be more pleased; for them, societal paralysis (on a continuum with passiveness, but itself appearing more and more likely) is the new end-game, an eschatological Nirvana devoutly to be wished by them so that they can continue with their secrets, notably, enlarging the scope and magnitude of abuse to the point that it becomes no longer detectable, and rather, simply the new *normality*. Yet, a selective Nirvana, for while the masses sleep the sleep of oblivion to reality, ruling groups remain as busy as ever, their appetites whetted by the subservience and lack of opposition facing them—a happy hunting ground of exploitation.

In this structural-psychological context of mental conformity to the established order, the individual, as in Ibsen's play, or in Shirley Jackson's 1948 *New Yorker* short story, "The Lottery," shields his/her eyes from the truth, falls comfortably into the collective mindset (guilt suitably assuaged through cultural reinforcement) about the evil into which all participate, and perfect the art of *silence* as the means of perpetuating that evil, for Ibsen, contamination of the baths due to toxic wastes flowing from the tannery, for Jackson, the ritual sacrifice of a human being, the person stoned to death by the community, to ensure prospects of a good harvest, in which case, for both Ibsen and Jackson, recovery follows, moving from capitulation to celebration.

Celebration, however, is ephemeral (or rather, skin-deep), a cankerous malignancy of the soul because of the obvious succumbing to crowd pressure which one buries deeply within—perhaps, just perhaps, the psychodynamics of *political catharsis*, the necessary purification allowing the individual complicity and denial simultaneously, so that stoning Tessie

Hutchinson or repudiating Thomas Stockmann is good for the community, a patriotic act, so therefore blameless and time to move on. Sound at all familiar in America, from at least 1945 on? Thus, celebration hangs on an imposed complicity (which the individual subject to cultural pulverization willingly accepts), so that if normality equals the status quo, it comes at a price: self-betrayal, in the sense that blocking from consciousness the secret which could expose the evil to which all through their silence have consented, results in a state of dissociation, the individual separated from self, others, community, on one level, falsely integrated on another, leaving a rather pitiful figure, one whose passiveness and lack of political consciousness is not surprising.

This dissociation fictionalizes reality into what ruling groups proffer for domestic consumption: the mythopoeia of freedom, itself closely following the principles of market fundamentalism, meant to displace all recognition of class dominance, the priority assigned to capital accumulation, the acceptance of a still more magnified National-Security State. Both metaphorically, and for some, actually, Rousseau's bold statement about Man everywhere in chains, as highlighting the emptiness of freedom when not supported by requisite institutional foundations (themselves, of course, still open to debate—although neither massive surveillance nor targeted assassination is among them), is on point concerning the individual's manipulation and resulting psychological costs, therefore, of humbling oneself to moral-mental enslavement in accepting the conceits and deceits of power, which remain carefully hidden. Sadly, the individual is ill-prepared to perceive his/her alienation. Political consciousness is suspect, moral consciousness doubly so.

The idea of a return to the status quo—the fruits of complicity—is misleading in one respect: actually, the status quo is a *dynamic* condition, not only because it requires the full arsenal of societal repression (including the soft glove of public relations) to hold the line, but also because, with each successive commitment to complicitous behavior, the screws tighten more, the escape routes are better covered, a rigidity of punitive law and ideological closure are raised a further notch. For both Ibsen and Jackson, the celebration, based on the respective communities having paid their dues to good citizenship, is false consciousness via internalizing the ruling societal myths, which are themselves the window-dressing for stabilizing the inequities of power. Transitioning to a seeming recovery involves first accepting acquiescence to these myths as a public, even moral, virtue; in the process one becomes anesthetized to human suffering, until finally, habituated to falsehood and/or denial, one passes beyond guilt, even uncertainty, into the glory of a patriotic sunset.

Thomas Stockmann and Tessie Hutchinson, our respective protagonists, one, by his protest, the other, by her death, acting as lone individuals in the uneven struggle each faces against the collective qua conformist mentality, reveal a *heroism* which is central to the writers' purpose: the penetrating critique of authoritarianism, the opposition to complicity with evil, the expression

of conviction essential to human potentiality, all in contrast to the moral void of the collective mentality strongly implied in their writings, a moral void then filled by a spiritual dread of breaking the mold of psychological closure and thereafter reaching out to a free existence.

Denial is a paramount trait of the acquiescent person, whose fear of life

itself, in particulars, truth, reality, compassion, whatever is, in a better world, an affirmation of humanity, has to be beaten out of the individual to ensure the stability and security of ruling-groups' power. The individual is as much the battleground, to be crushed, as is the enemy further afield. In sum, denial is a reactive formation, a built-in shield, that prevents the anguish of self-discovery, thereby allowing one to take the easy way out (Ms. Jackson's community involvement in ritual sacrifice, of which present-day examples abound!) and accounting for the elephant's disappearance while standing in plain sight (e.g., militarism, intervention, defense budgets). This disappearance in the mist of false consciousness is a psychological construction essential, as a basic process, not only to militarism, but also capitalism, its founding source in America, in which, whether as built-in shield or multiple screens, it prevents the penetration of alternatives—ideas, values, modes of structural organization—into the psyche.

Permit me a mixed metaphor: militarism is the stalking horse for the elephant, not the elephant itself. True, militarism has flourished under all sorts of ideological banners, but, except in purported democracies, it has been undisguised, a thing-in-itself, hardly an "elephant in the room," and rather, an object of pride or derision yet clearly visible. In this instance, America takes the cake for hypocrisy, primarily, I think, because professions of peace allow its own capitalist system the benefit of the doubt in the pursuit of aggressive unilateral expansionism (think, humanitarian intervention, better still, a Nobel-Laureate president who is proficient in the ways of assassination), and more directly, the willful neglect—with military power serving as the necessary pretext—on ideological grounds of starving the social safety net so as to keep the lower classes on their good behavior: the Damoclean sword of poverty impending, and with it the loss of collective-bargaining rights, should the principles of trickle-down economics and class-stratification of the social order be endangered. What is invisible, proves most consequential: a System, seemingly autonomous and automatic, as in the self-generation of beneficent outcomes and egalitarian ideology, depends for its security and continued operation on the *legitimation of force*, at best, along with the narcotized impulsion toward consumerism, neither of which breaks the surface of consciousness, thus yielding, analogous to the effects of militarism, the same passivity—politically, the acquiescent citizen.

When we flesh out capitalism as the primordial elephant in the room, that which is taken for granted, encourages silence in the face of destructive, injurious practice—Ibsen's public baths, Obama's entire conservation and environmental policies—, so fills out the individual's mental space as to be invisible, yet responsible for social conditioning and social discipline, then we begin to sense the full proportions of the alienation characterizing the body politic, from the dissociated self to the welcoming response toward the nation's war-making prowess and

record of counterrevolution, intervention, and—as with Snowden—just plain international bullying. Denial is the road to aggression in the name of peace. But wait! It's important to see that putting all one's analytic eggs in the basket of militarism detracts attention from capitalism, which, point-for-point, engenders the same psychological process of denial, and, as part of alienation, provides its own peculiar intensification to the operant paralysis of the individual. (Here I earnestly recommend Fritz Pappenheim's *The Alienation of Modern Man* [Monthly Review Press, 1959], to whom and which I remain personally indebted.)

Denial, not as in austerity, but as fleeing from the truth, is integral to the capitalist world view, for how else rationalize exploitation as puristic development and the inevitable course of history? American capitalism, in its guise as Exceptionalism, literally, however, gets away with murder, and by that I mean, not the casualties of war, but the truncated human spirit, in which commodity fetishism depersonalizes, by trumping, the human sensibility of wholeness, in favor of self-definition centered on possession and ownership—the human, one-sided, and to that extent deformed, a willing receptacle for the goodies on offer through the consumer-propaganda of advertising. For Marx human deformation runs deeper in capitalism, and, I would argue, runs deeper still in America, because the commodity has been enshrined as the holy grail of democratic society. Exchange value is the norm (not *use* value), so that everything becomes a commodity, labor power—in exchange for a wage—and the human being *per se*, whose worth is determined by the market. We discover our humanity, as Marx would say, in the

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, through and in our products (which themselves absorb our identities leaving us emptied of self), and therefore ripe for easy pickings in both the accommodation to power and the social blindness required for systemic preservation and expansion.

Yet beyond the commodity-structure both of economic and human relationships (the latter in which persons cannot relate to each other as whole beings, looking instead for a what's-in-it-for-me opportunity, thus ensuring fragmentary encounters with only a part of our beings), there is the all-important *fragmentation* of oneself as a natural consequence of commodity fetishism, precisely the psychodynamics found in the case of the “elephant in the room,” whereby one practices self-deception as a way of circumventing reality and moral standards of conduct in order at every turn to avoid the unthinkable governing one's own society, and the unthinkable of self-castration in the face of provocation. Nevertheless, whether elephant (capitalism) or stalking horse (the military-factor), the two are historically, structurally, and ideologically in a symbiotic relationship—if not actually inseparable, the distinction being that of antecedent and consequent, a relationship important to keep straight for explanatory purposes if one seeks the underpinnings of America's power-base and unilateral strivings for global hegemony.

Capitalism is the starting point for any discussion of the American nation-state, now, National-Security State, which adds to conventional political structure the elements of secrecy, surveillance, torture, intervention, paramilitary forces, espionage, all of which, along with more, add up to, not a single elephant, *but the whole trumpeting herd*, in characterizing the “room” or US mindset. Each element—let’s add to that, an hierarchical class system of great disparities in wealth and power, concentrated business and banking organization not subject to regulation in the general interest, and the failure to confront societal problems from climate change to unemployment and urban decay—like militarism itself, qualifies for elephantine status, i.e., taking up psychological space possessing meaning of sufficient vigor as to its inadequate or nonexistent realization, or, for militarism and military force, its overwhelming drain on national resources and decay of the national commitment to democracy, that for personal salvation and sanity one flies into the arms of denial. The elephant then disappears, like capitalism itself; societal problems do not, and perhaps never did, exist.

Capitalism is adept at playing tricks for its own survivability, in this case its ability to project *each* of these elements, like so many elephants, into the room preempting the mental space, so that secrecy, torture, espionage, etc., or climate change, urban decay (Detroit announced bankruptcy today), deregulation, receive at most passing attention and add fuel to the fires of denial, therefore ensuring that the capitalist system evokes little or no criticism. Each of its elements takes on the grandiosity of the whole, and enjoys the same rights of disappearance. If capitalism, militarism, any element of a critical nature were made known, the structural-cultural narcotic of submissiveness might wear off, anathema to a nation and economic framework counting on the dulling of mental-moral clarity as the needed preparing ground for examining and remaking societal institutions not subject to secrecy, surveillance, or decay. In that event, individuals would be able to identify and act on moral choices, however unpopular or hurtful.

What is at stake, if I understand Ibsen, is resistance to—forgive my neologism—the massification of consciousness. We have seen, in recent years especially, what is real and what is moral both becoming *unthinkable*, to be put out of mind, and hence, the spirit of let the good times roll, to wit, unimpeded militarism
capitalism, intervention
and

deregulation and so, increasingly, the disconnection, political and mental alike, between a capitalism-militarism symbiosis in its voracious demands and the objective welfare of society. What remains is, draining the national wealth in this way ensures the martial glorification of America’s global mission, inseparable from, even before the latest reification of the military spirit, a sustained posture of world counterrevolution, and with it, Obama’s escalation of the National-Security State for the advancement of both capitalism and its forcible implementation on the global stage—the belching fire of a Leviathan having no scruples.

Still, focusing on capitalism, one must not regard militarism as a negligible factor. They work together in inducing conformity, the latter because of the self-evident disproportionate allocation of force in society, which, more than a macrocosm of Stockmann's townspeople, gives literal meaning to the awesomeness of power—here the capacity for inspiring terror, and not only ostracism—that reduces persons to bended knee (disguised once more as patriotic celebration). It can be said that the bigger the armed forces, the more brazen their interventions, the more cynical the disregard of, and freedom to reinterpret, international law, then the greater the internalization of social discipline, which ideologically and necessarily includes as well an unsparing devotion to capitalism.

Finally, I suggest, there are as many elephants in the room as American capitalism chooses to *hide*

, their trumpeting hiding from sight and sound cries of the victims, here and abroad. Nuclear stockpiles, a global network of military bases, drone warfare, regime change, joint maneuvers, astronomical defense budgets, CIA-JSOC paramilitary operations, each vying for elephantine status, so as to continue without public scrutiny, and, in the nation itself, deniability as to policies and practices for the sole purpose of protecting and further enriching already super-rich individuals and corporate units. (Today, Morgan Chase announced practically unparalleled profits—to no-one's surprise, as the expected norm to be accompanied by public deference.) The various elephants, relying on political amnesia, crowd together absorbing all the oxygen in the room, leaving none for the people in their

democratic

existence, so that law, politics, culture, the Constitution itself, bear the imprint of institutional and ideological trends and/or practices distinctively reactionary on the slippery slope to fascism. But capitalism is the supreme elephant, ubiquitous and prevailing, now invisible, buttressed by a defensive-reaction formation reducing even skepticism, much less, criticism, to treasonous conduct: a solipsistic universe of patriotic Americanism, leaving the dissident feeling unclean and unwelcome. The trade-off? None worth the candle, only the sadistic thrill of wreaking violence on others, and the world of goodies—no questions asked—in which

commodity fetishism

renders consumerism next to God, the holy of holies.

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