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How Ruinous Does it Have To Get?

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Recent developments make an all-encompassing crisis plain to see. Society could scarcely be more bizarrely unhealthy, but is getting even more so all the time. With two million people behind bars, kids as young as two are on behavior control drugs like Ritalin. *Sunset* magazine carries pages of ads for “boot camps.” “Got an angry child?” “Defiant teen?”

A recent national study disclosed that emotional disorders among children have more than doubled in the past 20 years. Homicidal outbursts at school, as deeply shocking as they are, correspond to murderous rampages at work or at Burger King. Meanwhile, the trend toward year-round schooling feeds into the current prospect of a lifetime of more and more hours of work.

Last November a *U.S. News & World Report* survey announced that over 90 percent of students cheat. No surprise, where a similarly high percentage of citizens feel cynicism/no confidence concerning most of the ruling institutions.

Youthful smoking is on the rise; so are binge drinking, and health threatening obesity. And as with adults, kids’ levels of anxiety,

stress, isolation, and boredom are going up. TV fare is shock — and peep — show tabloid oriented for the increasing jaded. *USA Today* for July 18 pondered “Why America is so short-tempered,” as road rage erupts and parents get violent — to the point of murder — at Little League games.

It was recently reported that drug abuse and addiction in Oregon went up 232 percent from 1995 to 1999. On the national level, one out every three people say they have felt close to a nervous breakdown at some point, according to a study released in early July. The assortment of “healing” and alternative therapy approaches multiplies, perhaps in proportion to a massive and pervasive denial of the root causes of all the suffering and estrangement.

Meanwhile, afflictions such as chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia debilitate many; no specific causes can be found. It is as if a growing number of people are simply becoming allergic to society itself.

So many are now taking pharmaceutical drugs (e.g. antidepressants) that they now constitute a significant pollutant. An April issue of *Science News* reported this new form of contamination of water and soil.

Thus we now see immiseration in the personal and social spheres meeting up with the impoverishment of our physical environment. A graphic suggestion that the pain and emptiness felt by human subjects of capital and technology is connected to the ongoing destruction of nature (global warming, accelerating species extinction, oceans dying, etc.).

If the salaried thinkers of the dominant emptiness largely ignore the glaring fact of engulfing alienation, the word is definitely beginning to spread nonetheless. There is an alternative consciousness: for example, in the anti-culture of hundreds of the underground, do-it-yourself zines and pirate radio projects. And it is even showing up above ground, in films like *Matrix* and *Fight Club*, in novels like Alan Lightman’s *The Diagnosis*, and in the work of Bret Easton Ellis. Critique is making itself felt in many areas.

A culture this bereft cannot long sustain itself. Especially if we are equal to the task of demolishing it in favor of life, health, freedom, authenticity.