

War on Cynicism: Winning young Minds

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Our world is being traumatized by violence. Whether we label it political extremism, gang violence, or the madness of a lone killer, there is one common element: our young people. The sad reality is that we are losing the trust of our youth. We have not been able to provide them with a world of security where they are heard and protected. As a result they are seduced by a global culture of violence that is fuelled by cynicism.

Instead of admitting this problem, we have created mythologies that misrepresent the real reasons youth succumb to cynicism and violence. For example, the rise of political extremism among Muslim youth in Europe and the Middle East is blamed on Islam, with the claim that Islam indoctrinates anti-democratic and violent behavior. The rise of teen violence in America has often been presented as a natural outcome of adolescent hormones from which society has to protect itself. In both cases the growing population of youth is seen as a threat. In the Middle East it is referred to as the “youth bulge;” In America, “the teenage time bomb.”

How did we reach this state where we fear our own children? And how did we disappoint them so much that they chose aggression to voice their discontent with our failures?

With over 50 percent of the world’s population under 25 years old, we have no choice but to win over our young people. And in order to do this we have to confront our failures and ask ourselves some hard questions. Have we provided our young people with the proper social, economic, and cultural conditions? Have we modeled strong and fair leadership upon which young people can depend? Have we upheld the rule of law and practiced the principle of equality for all? Have we included our young people in our political processes? In short, what have we offered our young people as a viable alternative to aggression and cynicism?

As a starting point, it is important to illuminate the connection between poverty and violence. In most countries the rate of youth unemployment is between two to three times the national levels. In our quest for global development we have lost sight of the goal of human development for all. We have not provided an ethical order to guide global development, and economic gain has become the only objective. Without such direction, our young people are left to “look out for number one.” They are searching for meaning and purpose, for belonging. This meaning is sometimes found in consumerism, an

insatiable hunger that can never be satisfied. And sometimes it is found on the dark avenues populated by gangs and extremists.

Though the analogy is not often made, both gangs and extremist organizations offer disenfranchised youth a “home,” a venue of participation. They offer them what their society does not. For example, in environments with few social supports, gangs provide a sense of belonging, protection from other gangs, and also an illegal means of earning a living.

Likewise, as I already mentioned, radicalization among Muslim youth is facilitated by social alienation and marginalization, coupled with targeted indoctrination. In both cases youth are offered something they are not receiving from the dominant culture: a sense of belonging, inclusion in a group, the chance to earn a living, and even to feel admired and respected. In the Middle East, youth feel politically paralyzed, and are doubly excluded. Like the general population, they can not choose their governments and are severely limited in venues of self expression, such as open media, youth organizations and other civil society groups. Certainly, failed U.S. policies in the Middle East have provided a fertile ground for radical groups, operating under the banner of Islam, which offer youth a counter culture alternative: a sense of belonging to a global “umma,” perceived empowerment, an opportunity to become heroes.

And who are these heroes? What kind of role models are being offered to our young people? What kind of ethics have become important? Are these the ethics of the globalization we have chosen? Certainly the media plays a major role in constructing the heroes of today—the cultural capital of economic based globalization. In the absence of leadership from their rulers they can trust and admire, young people are looking to hip hop stars, extremist political leaders, and gang leaders, for guidance. And certainly the guidance they are receiving there will not lead us to a culture based on empathy and equity and the peaceful resolution of conflict.

Because we have failed to model the way for our young minds, we find ourselves helpless in the face of youth discontent. What is the way forward?

In order to produce a genuine ethical order to assess and redesign our global reality, a major paradigm shift is needed. And I trust youth to understand the necessity of dramatic change. They are good at opening their minds and hearts. They are willing to seek knowledge without having an expectation of what they will find. They are capable of developing their positions only after they have had a chance to listen and assess. They are aware, that not only do others who differ from them have the right to differ, but they may actually be right. We may be fossilized in our belief systems but our youth are not. We may not have been able to understand and accept each other, but I feel they can.

Young people are blessed with critical faculties many of us have lost. Having a critical view is an essential tool in seeing another’s view, to achieving intellectual, cultural and spiritual empathy with others. Confidence in oneself is critical in sustaining dialogue.

Self doubt curtails openness and the resulting inwardness leads to monologues of self justification and assertion. And we have been so busy with our monologues that we have not paid attention to the voices of young people, struggling to be heard. We have not led the way through these unstable times. We have followed the whirlwind of economic globalization rather than steer its course with sound social values and ethical behavior. In our willingness to put profit over people, we have fostered a climate of cynicism and passivism, of consumerism and survival of the richest, of the man with the biggest gun has the loudest voice. And such cynicism is a loss of faith, the very paralysis of human development.

And we do live in cynical times. Times when we do not dare to speak about morality or global ethics, unless we are ready to be diagnosed with a bad case of naivety. Times when we do not dare think out of the box, for fear we may be quarantined as a terror suspect or apostate. We live in times when we have to swallow the bitter pill of hypocrisy called Western democracy or else be injected with the poison of extremism. We live in times where freedom of speech has become nothing more than a virus that heightens the fever of fear in the name of security and cultural integrity.

This epidemic worries me, but I am faithful there is a cure waiting for beautiful young minds to discover. For this cure is in the mind itself. It exists inside all of us, in our will and in our imagination.

And with a little imagination we can find new ways to offer youth more creative economic opportunities. With a little imagination, we can put education first and foster the critical thinking skills needed to build open minds which can meet each other with understanding. By firmly modeling sound social values in all levels of our society, in our families, and in our governments, we can reclaim the trust of our people so they do not need to revert to violence to be heard. We can solicit the help of the media as we equip young people with the tools to critically dissect the tenets of consumerism, cynicism, and violence that are permeating the corporate world and the entertainment industry. And we can strengthen civil society associations and youth organizations that provide a home for youth as they search for their place in society, a place where they are valued and listened to.

I have faith in our young people that, equipped with the proper tools, economic, social and political, they will be able to achieve what we have not: a global ethic that can guide the path to globalization: An ethic that can humanize the economic global order that is dehumanizing our globe; an ethic that recognizes other competencies besides market competency, and encourages moral competitiveness as opposed to market competitiveness; an ethic that values peace over violence and dialogue over the barrel of a gun.

Now, you are probably ready to diagnose me with a bad case of naivety, but I can bear this diagnosis. For I believe idealism is exactly the antidote we need to the cynicism of the times. In fact, we need to be idealistic to win back our youth.



I have faith in youth to have faith in the future. And in this faith is a cure for the illnesses we have left behind us.

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