

# Outbreak



**Gooding**

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## Outbreak

An outbreak of critical thinking paralyzed the land. Its precise origin was difficult to pinpoint, but it was believed to have germinated somewhere in the hinterlands, away from the great urban centers of the nation. It first infected those of generally modest means and meager sophistication who lacked the intellectual training or cosmopolitan powers of discernment to recognize it or comprehend its pernicious effects. The rubes were just too unpolished to know what ailed them—or, for that matter, to realize that they were ailing in the first place. On the contrary, their affliction seemed to suffuse them with a sense of righteous indignation and release a store of pent-up energy that could pass for fervor. Far from convincing them that they were grievously ill, the sickness deluded them into thinking quite otherwise. It persuaded them that their fever was a symptom not of sickness but of health, that they were not merely thinking, speaking, and acting in their own best interest and the best interests of their compatriots, but that the position from which they argued was the moral high ground. Disturbing sickness indeed.

No matter where or precisely how it began, and no matter the delusions it inspired in its unwitting victims, the disease spread more rapidly and more widely than public officials would ever have anticipated and soon attacked even the unprepared or underprepared in larger towns and some major cities. Business owners fell prey to the disease, and bartenders and store clerks and middle managers and salespeople. Mechanics succumbed to it, and construction workers and bank tellers and stay-at-home moms. Its reach was indiscriminate. Citizens of all age

groups—even some teenagers and young adults—of all races and of most all income groups yielded to its devastating advance. Only in a few bastions of the effete, where the dense air of urbane pretense was difficult to penetrate, did the outbreak meet with staunch and even vitriolic resistance. The venerable fourth estate, for instance, showed a remarkable (and even sometimes puzzling) capacity to stave off the disease. And many public institutions were almost entirely immune to it. In higher education, as a particularly prominent example, it was virtually nonexistent. Then again, the air in that domain is so stuffy that foreign thought always has trouble infiltrating it.

The outbreak's effects, however, were felt everywhere, even among members of the fourth estate, and even in those public institutions where resistance to the disease itself was strongest. A plague of such broad sweep could not fail to exert a perilous effect on the society it afflicted. This was no mere spring cold or winter flu; this was an epidemic whose grip could practically bring a Great Society to its knees. It could potentially stop a New Deal dead in its tracks. Indeed, this was a scourge that could, if not promptly and properly treated, significantly impede if not entirely halt the social progress of a magnificent New Republic. It had to be neutralized or, preferably, entirely eradicated.

No shortage of rhetoric accompanied the rapid spread of the disease. In the halls of the nation's glorious government, in its splendid institutions of higher (and lower) learning, on its airwaves and in its electronic communications, talk of the plague ran rampant, and much of the talk was a manifestation of the very disease it took as its subject. The talk, in other words, merely revealed the symptoms of the disease that gave birth to it. In so doing, it further facilitated the spread of the disease! The perilous cycle of thinking, followed by talk, followed by more thinking, followed by even more talk did not bode well for the health of a great nation bent on fulfilling—at long last—its auspicious destiny.

Naturally, the chattering class thrust itself to the forefront of all the talk. But the people spoke too. A populace prone to smug apathy, to complacent self-satisfaction, was suddenly roused to speech and action for a cause other than the hometown football game or a morning of scripted reverence in the local church. The place was getting noisy. Public officials were getting nervous.

A coterie of the finest the fourth estate had to offer threw itself into the service of the government it esteemed, and the

pursuit of social progress that government so earnestly, so ardently, so highmindedly, and so forthrightly represented. This new pox on the land was an impediment to the forward march of humanity itself, and it must in the interest of world unity and social justice be addressed with all possible expedience. The folks down at the Messianic News Broadcasting Corporation (snidely referred to by its unenlightened detractors as “Messy News”) took particular relish in seeking out the root of the epidemic and exposing it to the world so that it could be withered by disinfectant sunlight. They wanted answers, by God, and they wouldn’t stop asking questions, probing questions, till those answers were obtained! No jerkwater journalists were these, nosiree Bob. Ivey Leaguers all, they embodied all the finest characteristics of postmodern purveyors of patriotic progressivism. They looked right, talked right, ate right, attended the right parties, maintained the right political affiliation, and slept with the right people. Above all, they thought right (which is to say, they thought Left). Hence they were damn well capable of asking the right questions and making sure they got the right answers. Their producers lined up expert after expert to counsel them on their country’s affliction and set the nation back on its proper course to sanity and wellness. Let the purge—er, catharsis—begin!

Rachel Madcow traced the source of the disease to cultural contamination. Stubborn superstition, ancient prejudice, and gross misinformation permeated the populace and sullied its collective consciousness. Hence the common herd lacked proper exposure to those cultural influences that were truly good for it, and because it also lacked the cognitive acuity to *decipher* what was truly good for it, it wandered blindly along customary paths that kept it hopelessly entrapped in its own past. Madcow’s interview with Professor Lillian Leadbottom was by no means singular, but it was certainly instructive. Professor Leadbottom had devoted her life to the study of cultures past and present as revealed through certain judiciously selected texts. These texts put the proper spin on the world—as it were—and so they were not bound by the anachronistic thinking that had led the world astray and kept it that way. Professor Leadbottom’s prodigious intellectual efforts had earned her the chair of the gender studies and cultural advancement department at Oldmoney University and garnered numerous grants and endowments along the way. She also headed up the local chapter of the Women, Gay, Lesbian, Transgendered, Sexually Confused, Differently Abled,

Historically Marginalized, Vertically, Horizontally, or Economically Challenged, and Other People with Hurt Feelings group (WGLTSCDAHMOVHECOPHF); she was a founding member of the nationally acclaimed Coalition of Oppressed Peoples Organized to Undermine Tyranny (COPOUT); and she had recently published her magnum opus, *Reinventing the World: Cultural Rebirth Facilitated by Proper Education and Carefully Directed Governmental Pressure*, so her authority to speak on the current cultural condition could hardly be questioned. Her impressive pedigree spoke for itself.



**Madcow:** Let me first thank you for taking time away from your busy schedule to be with us this evening, Professor Leadbottom. Your appearance on this humble program is truly a feather in the MNBC cap.

**Leadbottom:** Think nothing of it, Rachel dear. I am more than happy to give of my time and expertise to a cause so worthy. Perhaps we could go for a drink after the show.



**Madcow:** Perhaps. Professor Leadbottom, you have been outspoken in attributing the recent social turmoil to plain ignorance on the part of the general populace. Can you comment on that observation?

**Leadbottom:** It is more than a mere "observation," my dear. It is the result of a lifetime of careful systematic study. I have written extensively about it in all of my books. What we are witnessing now is simply residual antagonism toward the kind of healthy,

directed change that can lead us to a better future. People always fear what they don't understand, you know, so they are not to be judged too harshly for their reticence. Indeed, it is what we should expect from them.

**Madcow:** I see. You're kinder than I would be, Professor.

**Leadbottom:** I doubt it, my dear—but I would like to find out. At any rate, I'm not advocating clemency; I'm merely offering an explanation. I'm explaining their behavior. They're hypnotized, you see; they've been brainwashed by silly occult religious teachings and practices, by amateurish philosophizing about individual autonomy and "natural rights," by Madison Avenue pitchmen who urge them to consume, consume, consume. They are trapped in rolls and rolls of roles: gender roles, domestic roles, occupational roles, consumer behavior roles. Their lives are scripted for them, and so their beliefs and attitudes are scripted for them as well. Their assumptions about the world are reified and entrenched. They are simply reacting based on those assumptions—following their script.

**Madcow** [pensively, perhaps admiringly]: I see. And how can that script be changed, rewritten?

**Leadbottom:** What they require is a swift kick in their collective keister. [Chortles.] Metaphorically, of course. The real cure for their disease is proper education. I wrote about it in my latest book, you know.

**Madcow** [musing on the title of the book, a copy of which she has on the desk in front of her]: Hmm. "Cultural rebirth facilitated by proper education." I see what you mean.

**Leadbottom:** Quite. We need to get them away from those parents of theirs when they're quite young. Bring them up properly. It takes a village, you know. The child's mind is a blank slate, waiting to be inscribed. We must see to it that that which is inscribed on it is the right script. Can't trust their parents to do *that*. I'm talking about a complete cultural rebirth here. You can read all about it in my book.

**Madcow:** Of course. [Holds up the book so that the camera can get a shot of the front cover.]

**Leadbottom:** By the time they get to me at the university, we'll have them properly trained. You'll have no trouble from them then.

**Madcow:** Of course. Professor Leadbottom, what about the second half of your subtitle, "carefully directed governmental pressure"?

**Leadbottom:** Well, naturally, the older ones are already somewhat set in their ways. And there will be some recalcitrance, of course.

**Madcow:** Recalcitrance?

**Leadbottom:** Those who refuse to appreciate that which is good for them—good for everybody. Some are slower learners than others. Some few may never learn at all. But they'll be a tiny minority, I assure you. Most will come around in a generation or less. They'll learn what's good for them, learn to appreciate it, and this outbreak we're experiencing now will be a thing of the past. A bit of carefully directed governmental pressure will ensure that resistance is minimal. It's all outlined right there in my book.



**Madcow:** Of course. [Holds up the book again.]

**Leadbottom:** This is a cultural phenomenon we're experiencing, my dear, nothing more. Other advanced cultures have dealt with similar phenomena—dealt with them quite successfully. A bit of education, a bit of subtle pressure, and we'll be advancing smoothly into the post-capitalist phase of our existence in no time. No time whatsoever. Now, how about that drink?

That very same evening—in the very next time slot, in fact—Madcow's colleague Kief Odorman discovered a different explanation for the terrible cultural backlash that was plaguing the land. His featured guest that night was none other than Imeanwell Cant, the world renowned German philosopher and psychologist who was best known for his association with the famous (or infamous, depending on whom you asked) Hamburg School of psychological theorists. The Hamburg theorists derived much of their philosophical speculation from the work of their eighteenth century predecessor Georg Wilhelm Fraudrich von Higo, who garnered attention—some admiring, some not so—from his contemporaries in the deep-thinking biz by rejecting, outright, positivistic conceptions of reality that according to Higo had hamstrung deep thinkers for centuries. The trick in the deep-thinking business, he claimed, was to see the world not as it *seemed* to be but as it *could* be. Thus he formulated his theory of the “two worlds,” the world of the wee-wee and the world of the mind, as the terms translated into English; and from that formulation grew his hopeful postulation “I imagine; therefore I can be,” which in turn grew into a shimmering platitude that generations of high school English teachers could tack on their classroom walls to inspire their pimply faced students. (Other platitudes such as “Dare to dream, and make sure you dream big!” and “The only limits on the imagination are the limits we impose!” grew in turn from the original.) Building on Higo's foundational work, the Hamburg theorists had arrived at the conclusion that the only real reality was that which existed in the mind. Everything else was just the drab accoutrement of sensory experience encountered in everyday living, and the goal of the Hamburg theorists was to

empower humanity to escape it posthaste. At lavish conferences, over dinners served by white-jacketed waiters who did not have the luxury of speculating on the imagination for a living, the theorists hammered out the nature and the implications of their theory. Herr Cant had only recently acquired widespread fame, even among the lay population, by publicizing an important new discovery that stemmed from the theory. He appeared on Odorman's show that night to explain the current social unrest and peddle his new book, *Transcending Reality to Rebuild the World*, at the same time.

Odorman greeted the famous intellectual with the expression of intense interest and curiosity that he reserved for his most favored guests. *This* guy, his expression said, *this* guy should be taken seriously. *This* guy was worth listening to, for he might say something worth hearing.

**Odorman:** Dr. Cant, I know you live in Europe, but I also know you are familiar with the culture clash that's currently occurring here in our own benighted country.



**Cant:** Yes, Kiev. In fact we haf similar problems of our own right now. Ze peoples is very unrestful. Zey start ze riots in der streets und burn ze cars und break ze zhop windows und zuch.

**Odorman** [musingly]: Well, you Europeans have always been known for being more expressive than we Americans are. It's a cultural trait of yours that we admire but never manage to emulate. We're so uptight over here, you know.

**Cant:** Yah, uptight. Ve could use a little more "uptight" right now ourselves. Last veek zoze monkeys broke der vindscreen on my bront-new Merzedez. *Schweinjugend!*

**Odorman** [sympathetically]: Terrible. Terrible. But is it true that you psychologists have uncovered the root of the problem and may now be prepared to set us on the road to recovery?

**Cant:** Ze disease vuz diagnosed longk ago, Kiev. I must be clear about zat. Howeffer, zygoligy lacked both ze zophisticasion and ze gredibility to put ze diagnozis to its proper use. Peoples vuz more zhkeptical of us zen. Zey trust us now. Ve is on ze talk zhows, in ze bookstores, and on ze highly greditable news programs like zis vun. Ve can tell der zuckers anyzing, promise zem anyzing, and zey'll believ us because zey vant to believ. Das is der virtue of der ordinary *scheissekopf*: Promise zat zucker anyzing, und he'll believ you as longk as you got a PhD or your own talk zhow and zound zympatetic to him. But dere is zum out dere dat got a shcrew loose or two, and zey is der vuns dat ve is konzerned about here.

**Odorman:** A "screw loose," Dr. Cant?

**Cant:** Yah. Is just der old exprezzaion. It means der noggin is *gebrochen, gerecht* [gestures]. It don't vunczion right, know what I mean?

**Odorman:** I think so, but perhaps you can explain.

**Cant:** Look. Normal peoples vants vhat's best for everybody, right?

**Odorman** [meditatively]: I think that's safe to say.

**Cant:** Yah. It's okay, Kiev; you can trust me, I'm a doctor. It's zafe to zay zat normal peoples vants vhat's best for everybody. Zerefore, peoples vhat don't vant vhat's best

for everybody is *gebrochen*, right? Zey got der shcrew loose [gestures again].

**Odorman** [in truly deep reflection now]: I see.

**Cant** [shrugs]: It's patologic, Kiev. Zese volk vhat causes der drubble got a disease. You can call it der "shcrew loose" disease, if zat helps. Zey're zick, zick in der mind. Und zey need our help.

**Odorman** [with a look on his face that suggests he's beginning to achieve enlightenment]: Of course. These people who are criticizing the government now are literally *sick*. They have a debilitating psychological infirmity. And it's that infirmity that causes them to make trouble in the first place!

**Cant** [nodding smugly]: Yah. Zick, zick, zick. Zese peoples needs our help.

**Odorman**: But how do we recognize the disease? How do we obtain a formal diagnosis?

**Cant**: Easy, Kiev. Das is why your government hires expert zygologists und zygyadrists in ze first place. Ven vun pops up mit der schcrew loose, zey're zere to diagnoze it. Next ting you know, der drubblemaker is officially *verückt*, crazy. Und offen he goes to der vunny varm.

**Odorman** [face brightening immensely as epiphany is achieved]: Of course! Off he goes to the . . . er, institution.

**Cant**: Where der disease gan be properly dreated mit drugs as nezezzary. Or der lobotomy gan be administered if required. Und no more drubblemaker.

**Odorman** [beaming into the camera]: Isn't he wonderful, folks?

But there were some who rejected both the cultural and the psychological explanations for the mysterious popular resistance to governmental goodness. A few intrepid scientists traced the disease to an even deeper root. Fate Apauling, for instance, son of the renowned Nobel Prize-winning chemist Lindus Apauling and a creditable researcher in his own right, announced seemingly out of nowhere that he had discovered a genetic cause of the current social disease. And Kris Misuse, whose ratings were already better than those of both Rachel Madcow and Kief Odorman, rushed to bring him on his show. With his usual expression of earnestness and powerful emotion (because he cared so much), Misuse looked into the camera.



**Misuse:** There's been so much work in genetics lately, and so many useful findings. We've heard about the infamous "gay" gene, about the gene or genes that supposedly predispose us toward addiction of various kinds, even about a so-called "grammar" gene that makes us good with languages or something—I don't know. This is all beyond a simple journalist, Professor Apauling, even a journalist with a degree from Harvard. And I'm sure it's over the heads of a lot of our viewers as well, no matter how sophisticated they are. Can you break it down for us in just a few minutes?

**Apauling:** Well, Kris, it's not quite as simple as saying there's a "gene" that makes people resist change or become angry with their government—but I suppose it's fair to say that some people



have a genetic "predisposition" in that direction.

**Misuse:** So you're saying that all this caterwauling about the president and the congress stems from a genetic deficiency of some sort.

**Apauling:** Well, I didn't use the word "deficiency," exactly; the word I used was "predisposition."

**Misuse:** Aren't they the same thing? "Deficiency," "predisposition," what does it matter? Professor Apauling, is it true your famous father was best known for his comments concerning eugenics?

**Apauling:** I think he was best known for making perhaps the most remarkable scientific discovery of the twentieth century.

**Misuse:** Was he not responsible for these words? [He reads from a book that appears to have been open on his desk]: "At present we can only speculate on the implications this discovery [the discovery of DNA as the basis of all life] might have for the future of medicine, especially. Almost certainly it will lead us to cures for some of the world's most debilitating diseases. But it has the potential to achieve so much more. It has the potential, in fact, to construct in the future a healthier, fitter, happier, smarter, and more productive human race." That quote is from his 1957 classic *The Foundation of Life*, is it not, Professor Apauling? Isn't that the book that introduced DNA to us in the first place?

**Apauling:** My father had his shortcomings, Kris, like all men. Like all human beings. He was not perfect; nor did he pretend to be.

**Misuse:** But he did speculate extensively on the eugenic implications of his great discovery, did he not? Was he not criticized by some of his less enlightened, less visionary colleagues for speculating on such implications?

**Apauling:** He was criticized, yes—for saying what he believed, and nothing more. He believed the discovery might have widespread implications for the future of the human race. *Positive* implications.

**Misuse:** So what kind of stretch is it, really, to suggest that the eradication of this “predisposition” might be one of those “positive” implications?

**Apauling:** Nobody’s talking about “eradicating” anything, Kris. Or anybody.

**Misuse:** Haven’t you yourself talked about just that, Professor? Haven’t you spoken about “eradicating” debilitating diseases? Didn’t your father also speak about eradicating such diseases?

**Apauling:** Well, yes, but—

**Misuse:** It seems to me we’re quibbling over a fairly meager semantic distinction, Professor. [Looks into the camera.] Would it not be a wonderful “positive” development for the world, a great stride forward in the effort to improve the human race, if this obstinate, reactionary, backward, underdeveloped “predisposition” could simply be “eradicating”? Think about it, folks. What kind of door to the future might we be on the verge of opening here?

Indeed, a glorious future may await us, but the door to it has yet to be opened. The search for the precise cause of the

critical thinking outbreak continues, as the outbreak itself continues, unabated, unresolved, despite the best efforts of our very best journalists (not to mention the efforts of some of our other best minds) to “eradicate” it. And so, it appears, our story itself must needs be continued . . . .