

## **AMERICA'S THREE-FOLD CRISIS** by Cornel West

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America today faces a three-fold crisis: a crisis of vision, of motivation, and of meaning.

The crisis of vision is real. Most persons who think seriously about progressive politics are trying to examine what it means to expand the scope of democracy and democratic institutions. The fundamental challenge against powers that be, whatever set of elites, is insuring mechanisms of accountability for those below. Ordinary people ought to live lives of decency and dignity, and their voices ought to be heard. Basic decisions made by the elites, representatives, spokespersons, and institutions that guide and regulate their lives must be made accountable. The most crucial issue for progressive politics is the meaning and interpretation of democracy. I don't care if you're a radical democrat, deliberative democrat, direct democrat, associational democrat, socialist democrat -- democracy is about ensuring that ordinary people live lives of dignity. That's the bottom line for me. Which means that you're going to question any form of authority -- kings, queens, white supremacists, homophobes, male supremacists, corporate elites, bank elites, cultural elites -- anybody who is getting in the way of the fact that ordinary people are not here that long, because none of us are, and they ought to live lives of decency and dignity.

And the question then becomes: What are the possibilities of democratization in a moment in which more and more fellow citizens are reaching the conclusion that the very conditions for democracy are being undermined? Order, rule of law, community bonds, citizenship -- substantive, meaningful notions of citizenship. These conditions for democracy are simply sliding down the slippery slope to chaos. Deindustrialization and deregulation have resulted in economic decline; downward mobility for a majority of Americans, cultural decay, unregulated markets now create market cultures, market moralities, market mentalities, shattering community, eroding civil society, undermining the nurturing system for children -- the market culture that we're dealing with at this very moment. That's a long story, but that's the short cut to it.

All this reinforces the balkanization, the separation, the segmentation, and the fragmentation of a body politic. And of course in American society, with its vicious history of white supremacy, its racial lines of demarcation, that's still the most explosive issue. There can be no serious talk about expanding democratic possibilities when public life is so barren and vacuous and emptied and hollowed out; when persons do feel as if they live in privatistic cocoons that reinforce their hedonistic and narcissistic ways of being in the world; in which many young people do not conceive of themselves as having a future -- not simply as individuals, but with somebody else, in community.

Looking at the Jewish tradition, what is distinctive about the Hebrew Bible, as opposed to many other cultural expressions, especially those of ancient Greece, is that when it turns to ordinary people, their lives are the subject matter of tragedy. That epic significance is found in the lives of everyday people, as Sly Stone would put it: That's a breakthrough. That David can command the same kind of complex portrait that Greek tragedians or Shakespeare reserved for kings and queens. Or that Christians, like myself, can take seriously a Palestinian Jewish artisan brother. These are the real roots of democracy.

Understanding and identifying with the ordinary, the down-and-out is crucial. I like the depiction in the New York Times today, many of you might have seen it. The coalition for the Homeless went up to Christian citizens of this nation and said "How can you worship a homeless person on Sunday and then turn away from him on Monday?" That's a democratic sensibility. It's not a Democratic politics, it's a democratic sensibility. And the best of the Jewish tradition, the best of the Christian tradition, the best of the Buddhist tradition, the best of the secular brothers and sisters, the best of any tradition, for me in part is, "Are you keeping track of the plight and predicament of these ordinary folk?" You're not romanticizing them, you're not idealizing them -- every democracy that we know needs constitutional, legal constraints to insure the conditions of markets are in place for democracy to flourish. There can be no democracy without insuring freedom of association and movement and expression. There can be no democracy without including separation of powers so that we know that even our legal elites must, themselves, be subject to law; that even elected elites must, themselves, be subject to law.

How do you set up the conditions of democracy to insure that you can then expand it? The crisis of vision, for me at this particular moment, is we've all tended to remain within our various cubbyholes or our single issue orientations, scrutinizing a particular illegitimate form of authority. I'm going to specialize in white supremacy, and I'm going to specialize in corporate elites, and I'm going to specialize in bank elites and I'm going to specialize in ecological abuse, and I'm going to specialize in viscous male supremacists authority. And yet no public space is created to strengthen the bonds of the various progressives to one another, to bring more significant power and pressure to bear on the society as a whole. It doesn't happen too often in American life because, of course, we live in a deeply conservative society in which economic growth by means of corporate priorities, and the various xenophobias that run throughout our history, tend to truncate the possibilities for progressive politics. And yet we've been able to sustain over time a liberal rule of law precisely because ordinary citizens organized to insure it. And so if we meet the challenge of the crisis of vision, how then do we project a vision that allows different kinds of progressives to come together, not to reach some unanimity, but to work together so that we can bring some power and pressure to bear?

It's a fundamental challenge, and we're far from meeting it, in part because of levels of distrust, as a result of the balkanization that I mentioned before. How do we forge bonds and trust (and you don't form bonds of trust just by exchanging arguments, or even dancing together). Bonds of trust are forged by coming together in struggle. That's why when I hear some of the older Jewish brothers and sisters talk about what the civil rights movement meant to them, they're talking about something deeply existential and experiential. There was the example of a movement with a vision broad enough that it brought persons together. Even though they recognized the tensions and frictions were always there, they had their eye on something bigger than themselves. And so they subordinated that tension and that friction just long enough to shatter the racial caste system in this nation. It's was a major triumph.

The crisis of motivation is inseparable from the problem of organization. People will not organize or remain organized, if they're not motivated enough or feel a sense of obligation to sustain those organizations. I'm one of the chairpersons of Democratic Socialists of America. I spend my time, as well, working for the New Party. Why? Because there's an organizational

crisis among progressives. We don't have the kind of organizations that can project a vision to bring different kinds of progressives together. And that's a prerequisite for regenerating democratic possibilities. There are not enough people around who are articulating a broad vision with power and passion and trying to insure that issues of integrity, character, mutual respect, and civility unite progressives when they occupy that public space.

This crisis of vision, this crisis of motivation, also has much to do with the crisis of meaning. I do believe it has something to do with an existential crisis, and by existential crisis, what I mean is dealing with meaninglessness. And it's not just meaninglessness, it's hopelessness, it's not just hopelessness, it's lovelessness, for some folks, it's touchlessness; loss of tenderness and kindness and gentleness in people's lives. They're results of the creeping zeitgeist of cold-heartedness and meanspiritedness -- the gangsterization of American culture, which is the ultimate logic of a market culture in which people feel as if the only meaning to life is to gain access to power and pleasure and property by any method. That's existential crisis. Deep existential crisis.

And it has to do with despair. It has to do with dread, with giving up on any other conception of the good life. And so the crisis of meaning for me, is a fundamental dimension of trying to talk about progressive politics. But for me, meaning is inseparable from community and organization. And community and organization are inseparable from motion. Show me somebody who feels as if the world has closed in, who feels as if all possibilities are ossified and petrified, and I'll show you somebody who's dealing with a crisis of meaning. Show me somebody who's on the move, who has a sense of momentum, a sense of possibility, who feels the presence of effective bonds, supportive networks, and empathetic linkages, and I'll show you someone involved in a quest of meaning. And keep in mind that, for me, there is no absolute or ultimate solution to the problem or crisis of meaning. I just want people to be involved in the quest.

That quest for meaning means that they're trying to break out of these market conceptions of the good life and they're trying to deal with non-market values -- love and caring and concern, and service to others, and solidarity and justice and community and loyalty and trust and commitment and conviction. That's what the quest for meaning means. It can come through a variety of traditions, no doubt. No tradition has a monopoly. But we must appeal to our respective traditions because none of us is thoroughly traditionless, even though American myth likes to cast it in that way. In truth, we all have traditions. Judaism needs to reconstruct itself in such a way that the best of the prophetic possibilities are kept alive in that tradition. Christianity must do the same, as must the secular traditions.

I very much applaud what we're doing here. I think it's a sign that people are hungry and thirsty for a broader vision -- hungry and thirsty to know that there are other persons around who are similarly motivated. They're not afraid to move toward being part of the quest for meaning, one in which we make a difference in changing this society and the world.

Looking the cynicism in the face and going beyond it is a tremendous challenge, given the pain, the anguish, and the agony that we see in this city and around this country and the world. But it seems to me that we can do no less.