

The American Dream... or Nightmare?

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Review of *Discovering America As It Is*

If you are looking for a current, uncompromising exposé of the savagery of the American political and economic system, then you must consider this impressive compendium of statistical information, pertinent facts, and expert testimony. In his 466-page book, with an additional 86 pages of endnotes, Lithuanian human rights activist and former anti-Soviet dissident Valdas Anelauskas has succeeded in exposing „The American Dream" as it is: A ruthless corporate oligarchy masquerading as a „democracy" and „free enterprise." Like many immigrants from former Soviet-controlled East European countries, Mr. Anelauskas has come here with his family in search of a more dignified and civilized life. Instead, what he has seen „here is fundamental injustice, brutal exploitation, morbid individualism, obscene greed, odious hypocrisy, ad nauseam.... This whole society," says Mr. Anelauskas, "is like one huge Jerry Springer show. It is totally sick."

Of course, those of us who regularly read Noam Chomsky, Gore Vidal, Howard Zinn, or Michael Parenti will find it hard not to agree with Mr. Anelauskas. But when was the last time you heard such corporate spin doctors as Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, or Peter Jennings engage any of the above in an honest debate about the American Way? Average Americans have no idea that they are not living in „the land of liberty and democracy," but in "a land of misery and plutocracy." One has to give the spin doctors hired by the American political, corporate, and educational establishments one's begrudging credit for somehow convincing their overworked and befuddled fellow Americans that freedom means choosing CBS, NBC, or ABC; the Republicans or the Democrats; Bush or Gore; Coke or Pepsi; Tweedledum or Tweedledee. That American democracy and the American Constitution are divine gifts from our Grand Pater. That the American Way is the only right way. That it is in the interest of our „national security" to spend close to \$300 billion dollars on the „defense" every year—even though nobody, not even the Commies, poses a threat to the United States. And that to live in constant fear of being fired (without due process), losing health insurance, and working the longest hours in the world with the shortest vacations is to live in a City Upon a Hill. Hallelujah! God bless America — Corporate Godzilla's headquarters for world operations.

Mr. Anelauskas has cataloged the evils of the American socio-political system in an extremely patient and conscientious manner, a catalog of misery and corruption so fantastic as to be unbelievable. And yet every claim or observation is scrupulously documented, and the reader is offered a breadth and depth of knowledge so vast that it should probably put to shame all the certified brains of the State Department and the White House—although it is arguable if these people are shameable since it is arguable if they still have a conscience.

The book opens with an insightful overview of American myths and realities by Y.N. Kly, a professor of justice and international law. Mr. Kly describes *Discovering America* as a „masterful research," which "exposes the striking difference between the popular world view of the U.S. and its present reality, a reality with which [Mr. Anelauskas], as an anti-Soviet dissident who came to the U.S. in search of freedom, justice, democracy and economic fairness, has had to come to grips.... His findings, which this book faithfully relates, can only be described as devastating to the popular world view of the U.S. and its potential for human-centered democratic leadership."

In the autobiographical introduction, „My Journey to the Land of Misery & Plutocracy," Mr. Anelauskas quotes, quite ominously, Sigmund Freud, who described America as "a mistake, a giant mistake!" He then recalls, when he was a young Lithuanian human rights activist, his original respect for the U.S. as a free and democratic country, a preconception totally shattered after he spent a few years here. We are offered a rare insight into the social and political struggles in Lithuania, a country rich in tradition and history, a country of which hardly anything of any substance is ever mentioned in the American media. Mr. Anelauskas concludes the autobiographical part very candidly. He says: „My feelings towards American extreme capitalism are the same as toward Soviet/Russian communism: I wish it the same demise. I long for the day when the world can supercede it, regarding it, too, as one of

humanity's very mistaken directions."

Not even Chomsky or Vidal can speak quite with the same appealing candor.

The rest of the book is divided into 13 chapters, each a record of such injustice and criminality that each would quite likely be enough to demand an immediate termination of the American experiment in „democracy" and to call for a complete overhaul of American society — if, that is, such a thing were possible.

In Chapter 1, Mr. Anelauskas quotes U.S. Supreme Court Judge Louis Brandeis, who once pointed out that „We can either have democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both." I wonder what it is that an average American fed on a steady diet of national myths and corporate lies would say when confronted with this „dilemma." But in America one can never assume the obvious. „This American Dream," points out Mr. Anelauskas, "is for the lucky few and is a nightmare for the many."

In „The Tears of the Poor," we read about the heartbreaking story of America's poverty and the growing gap between the fabulously rich and the hopelessly poor. "Lives That End at Birth" illustrates the tragedy that, although American politicians and, in particular, Christian religionists, rave and rant about family values, the fact is that "America doesn't really care for children as a whole," according to Burt Harvey, whom Mr. Anelauskas quotes at the beginning of the chapter. He then backs it up with some appalling statistics: Every day in America six children commit suicide, thirteen children are homicide victims, fourteen children are killed by firearms, eighty-one babies, die, 280 children are arrested for violent crimes, 443 babies are born to mothers who had late or no prenatal care, 781 babies are born at low birthweight, 1,403 babies are born to teen mothers, 1,827 babies are born without health insurance, and so on.

The theme of the myth that the American government cares about family values is continued in Chapter 4 with the same unrelenting unleashing of data, quotations, and illustrations. In „The Sorry State of Education," Mr. Anelauskas reminds us that in America only seven percent of the federal budget is spent on education. (If I may digress: Gore Vidal once calculated that in 1986, close to 90 percent of the disbursements of the federal government went to the military, or as it is "laughingly" called „the defense." Consider these two figures and then consider the extent of the evil and madness of the current socio-political system of the United States.) Not only is the amount of money spent on public education pathetically small compared with the reckless and suicidal military spending, but the American educational system is, as Mr. Anelauskas says, „purposefully designed to make people, to borrow Adam Smith's phrase, 'as stupid and ignorant as it's possible for a human being to be.'" No wonder that as many as "forty percent of America's fourth graders actually believe the world is flat"!

„Third World Housing in First World America" talks about the homeless, „the most egregious symbol of a cruel economy," as Robert Hayes said. "Desperate People Do Desperate Things" shows how „criminality is at the heart of the [American] social system," resulting in crime rates unprecedented and unparalleled in any civilized country in the world. Crime in America, say Mr. Anelauskas can "strike anyone, anywhere." Again some statistics can make one gasp in disbelief: The United States has more murderers than doctors, college professors and police officers. Perhaps 800,000 murderers are living free in America. Imprisoning these people will not change anything. In Chapter 12, "Oppressed Minds," Mr. Anelauskas mentions the by-now well-known fact that the United States imprisons a higher proportion of its population than any other country, currently close to 2 million inmates. And growing.

Chapters 8 through 11 give an overview of probably the worst form of abuse of American „democracy": the corporate tyranny that makes nonsense of whatever free enterprise or freedom there is in America. As Mr. Anelauskas argues, this tyranny is made possible by what Gore Vidal calls „socialism for the rich," resulting in a staggering \$150 billion for corporate subsidies and tax benefits. Those who are not initiated into the anti-human activities of American corporations should perhaps not read these chapters: the exposé is likely to make one nauseous. The ruthless downsizing, the mind-boggling disparity between the income of the CEO's and that of average Americans, the denial of basic benefits to millions of Americans, and other such savage abuses of power are more unquestionable evidence of what Mr. Anelauskas has earlier called "a totally sick society."

„Oppressed Minds" (Chapter 12) argues that „American society is trapped in a system of private tyranny disguised as a free and open system" and that the mass media controlled by few huge corporations make sure that „real democracy" never threatens „the private tyranny

of the wealthy." It is truly irresponsible and silly to refer to the essentially two-party system of the United States as „democracy." The two parties are two ugly faces of the same corporate hydra, „two heads of the same beast." Current Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader, whom Mr. Anelauskas quotes, best describes the two-party system: „The two party duopoly — essentially one corporate party with two heads called Republican and Democrat, each wearing different makeup — presents the citizenry every four years with a choice between the Bad and the Worse. And every four years, both the bad and the worse get worse because there is no counter pull to the corporate right-wing pull."

To James Madison, the Father of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, „a pure democracy" was one of the worst forms of government: the United States was designed not as a democracy, but a certain kind of federal republic with some elements of democracy. But to the verbal manipulators of the political and corporate establishment, „democracy" is sacred and means whatever allows the rich and the powerful to make a quick profit and to distance themselves from the poor. As Michael Parenti once said in his famous book *Democracy for the Few*: „Proximity to the poor is to be avoided."

The last chapter, „The New World Order Takes Shape," elaborates on a rather obvious trend: that the U.S. rich elite "are 'predestined' to be the world's controllers." Mr. Anelauskas surveys the genocidal policies of the U.S. government towards American Indians and the enslavement of Africans, and then points out that only before 1895 the United States had carried out 103 military interventions — a mere prelude, though, to hundreds of military interventions and thousands of covert interventions in the 20th century. Even though no country in the world "is capable of posing a threat to the United States," the budgets of the Pentagon, the CIA, and other security and intelligence organizations continue to grow at dizzying heights. As Mr. Anelauskas was finishing up the book, the United States, through NATO, embarked upon yet another military intervention, this time in Serbia and Kosovo. Since then, the stupidity, brutality, and illegality of the attack have all been gradually exposed — if only in the alternative media — but that the intervention was in contravention of international law was obvious from the very beginning to those who refused to be bamboozled by the distortions and lies of the mass media.

In the concluding comments, Mr. Anelauskas quotes the late President of France, François Mitterand: „They are hard, those Americans. They are voracious. They want undivided power over the world." "There is every reason to believe," says Mr. Anelauskas, that „the world is in grave danger because of America's goal of global hegemony."

And yet, the book ends on a hopeful note: All empires and tyrannical systems eventually crumble. Recently, this happened to the Soviet Union. "So, too, there may come a day," says Mr. Anelauskas, "when, as with 'the former Soviet Union,' people will speak of 'the former United States.'"

Perhaps.

One would like to argue that Mr. Anelauskas' devastating critique is an impassioned hyperbole, that things are not really as bad as he describes them. If so, then one may find oneself in a no-win situation: trying to challenge — not his views — but facts.

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