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Armchair Spartans and The Spectre of Decadence

By John Barker

John Barker examines America's 'stern white men', the intellectual warriors of neoliberalism, and finds them struggling to reconcile their psycho-political economy of discipline and restraint with the defensive manoeuvring of capitalism in crisis. Far from producing an Anglo-saxon rerun of Sparta based on restraint, will power and competition, American neoliberal policies have spawned the nightmare of hyper-consumption, spiralling debt, over-work linked obesity and wars-by-proxy fought by 'green card soldiers'

Finally, in a reluctantly given news conference in April 2004, some one year after the invasion of Iraq, George W. Bush got around to saying it; the D word. 'The consequence of failure in Iraq would be unthinkable. Every friend of America and Iraq would be betrayed to prison and murder as a new tyranny arose. Every enemy of America and the world would celebrate, proclaiming our weakness and decadence, and using that victory to recruit a new generation of killers.' It provided a sub-text to the pre-invasion rhetoric with its frequent use of 'appeasement' to describe and belittle opposition to it by Western citizens. As we now know, our suspicions have been confirmed drip by drip (the citizen boredom factored into this coy and drawn-out process), that it wasn't just the analogies that were misleading.

spartans

Decadence, the nagging psychic fear of it and the accompanying metaphors of softness and disease, is a language both of various fundamentalisms, and more significantly of empires and their elites, however vestigial they might be. Thus at the end of 2004 Mr. Blair, on a surprise visit to Basra, was moved to say, 'We British are not a nation of quitters.' This was soon after the British House of Commons Defence Select Committee had concluded that British troops would have to be in Iraq for at least ten years. Mr. Blair's 'we' in this instance, is palpably not an inclusive 'we'. In Mr. Blair's eyes, the country has far too many welfare recipients (the disabled are to be 'helped' back to work and single mothers kept in penury). Indeed there are far too many potential quitters, people without will-power, like the poor and fat who can't keep to a diet, let alone 'woolly liberals'.

In the instance of the Iraq invasion, the misleading rhetoric and the misleading 'evidence', both as to Iraq's WMD and regime connections to al-Qaeda, tell a story about the attitude of its leaders to their own citizens. Without such threat triggers, they were not considered to be resolute enough; not tough enough for the 'realities' of the modern world. The irony – if that is what it is – is that what such champions of the resolute are defending, is also instrumental in creating the very softness of its citizens; a successful Western consumer capitalism. This is 'the West' both as individual nation-states and collectively, with a US leadership that is sometimes challenged within the West, but more often not so. It is the Anglo-Saxon part of this world which has assumed the role of the 'stern white man' in relation to the rest of the world, and this essay will concentrate on that part, but the fear of decadence is not exclusive to it. Thus in the build-up to the Gulf War of 1991, President Mitterand of France insisting that its forces become involved in the land battle argued that 'It was necessary to assume the responsibilities of France, its history and the forty generations that have preceded us, and not only the pre-occupations of our generation.'

To overcome this glaring contradiction, whereby both consumerism and its attendant version of democracy, are perceived both as weakness and what is to be defended, decadence is a most selective psycho-political concept. Notions of self-restraint and self-discipline are similarly selective. This is most clear in the Anglo-Saxon world which sees itself as resolute where it matters, that is militarily,

and yet at the same time has the highest levels of both personal indebtedness and obesity in the recorded world. These are characteristics that would be anathema to that Anglo-Saxon Puritanism so evident in its economic ideology. This selective notion of decadence does not include the huge amount of waste produced in this world; nor the need for some parents to send their children to boot camps; nor even the composition of their armies.

In some instances however, the contradictions are glaring. The neoliberal mode of fundamentalist capitalism – pushed hardest by the Anglo-Saxon world – seeks the cheapest labour it can find wherever it is. Its political leadership however has worries that this process may go too far, may make China too strong for example, and that its own citizens have become too pampered to do hard work, and that this is a source of long-term weakness. The global power elite is at its nastiest, is most regressive when it rides roughshod over its own contradictions. In the case of work, those at the harshest receiving end are immigrant workers in the West, and a newly defined 'underclass'. To accompany this, neoliberal ideology has introduced the notion that 'rights' have to be earned; that they are dependent on responsibilities – as defined by the global power elite itself – being carried out.

In a recent documentary series of BBC television and entitled *The Power of Nightmares*, now a feature-length film, Adam Curtis argued that the chosen method of overriding this central contradiction – comfort as the promise of modern capitalism and comfort weakening resolution – is to recreate a resolute national cohesion by powerful presentations of powerful threats. By reference to a Cold War philosopher at the University of Chicago, Leo Strauss, said to be major influence on warmonger-for-democracy Paul Wolfowitz, he argued that men of government had come to use fear (however real the threat) as the central means of social control when the political language of 'progress' had lost its value and become unconvincing. Strauss he said, legitimized the use of deception and manipulation by the ruling elite to for its citizenry to do the right thing and be resolute against whatever threat had been created or exaggerated by specialist manipulators. Curtis also argued that mistrust of their own citizens, their decadence, was at the heart of this rationalization, and that ironically this was the same psycho-political drive of the fundamentalists of al-Qaeda. For both, it was the elite few who must force their own people to see the truths, truths that are always hard, for them to see their true interests.

Curtis rather overdoes the power of ideas alone, and the influence of Strauss himself. In an obsequious interview with Wolfowitz in *Vanity Fair* (which plays along the notion that criticism of Wolfowitz and by extension the invasion of Iraq, is somehow anti-semitic), he laughs off the influence of Leo Strauss. As a graduate student, he says, he attended a couple of Strauss lecture courses on Plato. These lectures, Strauss critic Shadia Dury summarises as the encouragement of a patriotic fervour by philosophers '... wanting to secure the nation against its external enemies as well as its internal decadence, sloth, pleasure and consumption.' Bog standard elitism, and nasty with it. In the present reality, in the face of people prepared to give up their lives as suicide bombers, aimed at least in part against the perceived decadence of the West and its spread into the Islamic world, such thoughts must have been lurking in White House psycho-politics. However it is only when the military victory in Iraq (a sure fire win: as the warmonger Richard Perle put it in 2002: 'The Iraqi force today is a third of what it was in 1991, and it is the same third, 11 years closer to obsolescence'), became a problematic occupation, that this fear of the decadence of one's own citizenry (fed on the sound bites of consumer capitalism, and with short attention spans, as the elitist Michael Ignatieff had it at the time of the Gulf War), clearly emerged. It was then that President Bush said that the USA could not afford to be perceived as decadent. In-for-the-long-haul talk.

If Strauss did have such influence however, it is much more at the level of rationalising the use of mass scale manipulation. It is in this respect that Curtis is strongest. He describes in detail how more or less the same faces who made the justifications for invading Iraq, had done something identical

nearly 30 years ago. Rumsfeld and Cheney, disliking the whole notion of detente with the USSR and the CIA assessment that it was not a threat, created a 'Team B' in which evidence was made-up (even CIA black propaganda was used as if it were real), and assumptions made on generalisations about Soviet attitudes.

The still practising and far better known Samuel Huntington is, I believe, far more relevant to the present day American elite's concern with decadence. His support for the Iraq invasion and articulation of the virtues of the Anglo-Saxon 'stern white man' in a dangerous world of 'failed states', meshes with a long-term dislike of too much democracy and welfare payments domestically. His is a 'military definition of reality' as C. Wright Mills put it in his remarkably prescient *The Power Elite*. Huntington is now best known for his grandiosely titled *The Clash of Civilizations*, but has also been a government man. His first book *The Soldier and the State* appeared in 1957, a look at the civil-military relationship in the USA which makes no reference to the Wright Mills book which had appeared a year earlier. It ends with a eulogy of West Point, the USA's elite military academy. 'West Point is a grey island in a many coloured sea, a bit of Sparta in the midst of Babylon. Yet is it possible to deny that the military values – loyalty, duty, restraint, dedication – are the ones America needs most today. That the disciplined order of West Point has more to offer than the garish individualism of Main Street.'

Tell that to Wall Street! But Wall Street is what West Point is there to defend against all-comers. Of ancient Sparta itself, Xenophon reported that its legendary law-giver, Lycurgus, banned the use of coin to free-born Spartans on the grounds that it would undermine the tight knit organization of the state. There is besides, the military-industrial complex, far bigger than when Wright-Mills first described it, a revolving door of personnel, and subsidised profit from easy going contracts both in the UK and the USA. Huntington does not wish to see what is there, so he looks elsewhere to impose discipline on garish individualism. Like the poor, far too comfortable on welfare money.

In the 1960s, a government hawk on Vietnam and adversary of the new counter-culture, he contributed a large essay to a book called *The Crisis of Democracy*. There was too much of it, that was the crisis. The 1960s had this kind of effect on the realists, and elder neocons like Irving Kristol, not to mention Thatcher and Reagan. For them this was when decadence set in, a 'double-whammy' of the counter-culture and a confident western working class asking for more. Michael Kalecki could not have anticipated the counter-culture, but in his famous 1944 essay he understood clearly that discipline was more important to capital than immediate profitability, and that therefore 'full employment' would be unacceptable. A government man and armchair Spartan like Huntington is always preoccupied with discipline. Thus in the 1960s essay he argues that, 'Democracy is only one way of constituting authority, and it is not necessarily a universally applicable one. In many situations the claim of expertise, seniority, experience and special talents may override the claims of democracy as a means of constituting authority.' This is bog standard elitism in which what is a 'special talent' is determined by a small world which monopolizes the definition of what constitutes a special talent, and who has it. But the real thrust of his attack on the democratic impulse of the 1960s is that it increased government spending while reducing its authority.

When it comes to government spending, he does not mention the costs of the Vietnam War which he strongly supported, a war which undermined the Great Society project both politically and economically. No, Huntington – unlike other social-democrat warmongers like W.W.Rostow – blames the Great Society project itself, and picks on the usual suspects like public sector unionisation and welfare payments. In typically brazen style he wrote, 'a government which lacks authority and which is committed to substantial domestic programmes will have little ability, short of a cataclysmic crisis, to impose on its people the sacrifices which may be necessary to deal with foreign policy problems and defence.' This when the Vietnam War budget was at its height.

Huntington is a member of the American Enterprise Institute's 'Council of Academic Advisers'. This particular Institution of Assertion, is one of many well financed, non-academically reviewed such 'think tanks' (as if thinking itself were now an elite specialisation), which have become an integral part of right wing American politics. Here they are 'fellows' and 'senior fellows' as if stepping out of an Oxbridge-type detective novel; they are not however unworldly purveyors of archaism chic. Some have been in and out of government, and move in the same circles as what is now the dominant sector of the Republican Party. The AEI in particular, apart from being long term enthusiasts for an invasion of Iraq, articulate – these armchair Spartans – a fascistic version of what is decadence. For once, 'fascistic' is not hyperbole.

They are particularly concerned about too many people being born in wrong parts of the world, and the demographic decline of the stern white man. For Huntington, 'Muslim population growth is a destabilising force', while Westerners constitute, 'a steadily decreasing minority of the world's population.' Another 'fellow', Ben Wattenburg talks of how 'The West has been the driving force of modern civilization, inexorably pushing towards democratic values. Will that continue when its share of the total (global) population is only 11%?' The Institute contains other racist theorists like Robert Bork and Charles Murray. I say 'racist' because the subtext of their 'underclass' notions are that the feckless and criminal are mostly black. Bork's *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, a diatribe warning against the rise not of decadence per se, but of a degeneracy with clearly racist overtones. It provides an instance where for once satire has a cutting edge, predictive at that, these people anticipated as the Knights Templar of Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo-Jumbo*. Bork writes in all seriousness of a 'collapse of the criminal justice system which displays an inability to punish adequately, and often enough, an inability to convict the clearly guilty.' The figures for those in prison in the US are staggering (701 per 100,000) and for young Afro-Americans even more so, a veritable American gulag. Bork wants more. On levels of imprisonment, Murray is more sanguine: it is one important method of 'keeping the underclass from getting underfoot even though its numbers are undiminished.' Murray's work of correlating race and intelligence has been comprehensively trashed by serious scholars, but you can't keep these people down. In an article in *The Sunday Times* (3/4/05) he urges Britain to give up on social programmes for this underclass and asks instead if Britain is willing to pay the price of a 250,000 prison population. Unfortunately the vestiges of a welfare state, still extant in the USA as well as Britain, 'by its nature generates large numbers of feckless people,' he says. It makes it easier '... for men to impregnate women without taking responsibility for them, easier for women to raise a baby without the help of a man, and easier for men and women to get by without working.' Feckless men '... are unable to get up at the same time every morning' and are sexually selfish with equally feckless women, single mothers being one of the main components of his 'underclass'.

At one time circles around the Thatcher-Reagan axis, whose ideological influence still lingers heavily, took up the phrase "the politics of envy" to describe even the mildest of ideas to reduce inequality. They talked of an obscene resentment of success and the successful. What is extraordinary with people such as the AEI, is their resentment of the cost of even a minimal welfare state that has been cut back year after year. And behind that lurks an extra dimension to their demographic fears. They cannot bring themselves to blame the success of consumer capitalism for this relative shrinking of the Western world's demography, still less the pressures to succeed in it as with two career marriages. So instead all their subliminal fear and resentment is aimed not just at too many Palestinians being born, but that too many children born within the Western world are born to the wrong sort of people, to feckless people who are quite likely not to be 100% white.

The ideologues that I have singled out here are extremists of the stern white man's fear of decadence. They focus their fears and resentment on the poor of their own country. What is disturbing is how much their view of the world and their language is percolating into mainstream Western politics, like Tony Blair referring constantly to 'hard-working families who play by the rules' as the only real

electorate in the recent British general election. In the case of the USA it follows more seamlessly from the psychic core of its extremist capitalism, that failure is the consequence of a personal defect. The preacher Henry Ward Beecher laid it on the line thus: 'If men have not enough, it is from want of provident care, foresight, and industry and frugality. No man in this land suffers from poverty unless it be more than his fault, unless it be his sin.' Easy to see how this – Puritanism's Creationist wing included – mirrors the ideological use of Darwinism.

This concentration on the faults of the poor, is a means of avoiding any frank speaking about the 'decadence' of a consumer capitalism that urges you to have what you want, while its political-ideological defenders demand quite different qualities from its citizens. Certain 'key words' from this dangerous language of decadence emerge: 'restraint', 'sacrifice', 'frugality', 'resolution' and 'willpower'. Many of them appear in the language of food and diet, with the poor usually the target of the moralism that goes with much of what is said about obesity: the moralism of the lean, trim, masters of the universe, the Darwinian 'fittest.' It is true that as Greg Critser says 'Poverty is a lonely place and cheap food is a natural balm against it', but the facts are that it is the Anglo-Saxon heartland of the 'stern white man' and his resolute will power, that the instances of obesity are highest. The USA comes first, Britain and Australia next (with Fiji also in there somewhere). In the USA 26% of the general population are set to die early as a result, though whether this includes Americans in soup kitchen queues is unknown. In Britain some 22% of children are defined as obese. They are also Western countries with massive income inequalities which exploded during the same period as the emergence of obesity on such a scale. The recent concern in China about obesity statistics has also followed the explosion of inequalities in that society.

The starting point some 25-30 years ago, also coincides with a political decision to get American farmers on-side in a new 'right wing' voting coalition, created by the Nixon Administration against the remnants of those who had believed in and benefited from Johnson's 'Great Society' project. Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz set up the subsidisation of corn production (to the continuing anger of the Third World) which has kept prices down along the food chain of carbohydrates and meat. Corn also became the source of HFCS, six times sweeter than sugar. At around the same time palm oil was successfully processed for frying French fries (chips) and baking cookies. It is 45 % saturated fat. Cheap food became especially unhealthy food. Reading about 1930s Britain, cheap food was always unhealthy food, but there was not so much of it to trigger conditions like type-2 diabetes that are now so clearly related to cheap corn and its derivatives which, by the rush of insulin produced, could be called addictive. In a moment of radicalism, Atkins of the Atkins diet, says such unhealthy 'appetites were called forth by the instruments of corporate capitalism.'

These then are the material conditions, rather than the decadence rhetoric which sees only personal defects. The period in which they have arisen is one which has also seen significant changes in both work and leisure in the Western world. In his book *Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World*, Greg Critser does take the moral position, 'Most of us are fat because we are slothful and gluttonous', but puts this into the context of how '... in the USA we have become a society of production and consumption. If you're not doing either, then what are you doing buddy?' The same period has also seen the development of a diet industry on an unprecedented scale, and this business is not primarily, if at all, aimed at the poor. Whether the Atkins diet works or not, Steven Shapin noted ('The Great Neurotic Art' *London Review of Books* 5/8/04), the 2004 estimate for the 'low-carb' business, with its 'food, books, and paraphernalia' was that it would be worth \$30bn. He notes how the moral texture of eating always involved class; how the 'high' ate later than the 'low' as a display of delayed gratification. More significantly he notes a change in not just the presentation, but the process on offer in that period. He cites a diet book of 1967 by one Dr Irving Stillman which emphasized radical calorie restriction and the will power that this required. 'You must develop a firm, almost fanatical desire to lose dangerous excess weight.' By contrast the democratic Atkins, as Shapin calls

him, argued that, 'Fighting the scale armed only with willpower and determination, works, at best for only five low-fat dieters out of a hundred.' He cites Barry Sears, proprietor of the smash Zone diet as assuring potential clients that 'weight loss has little to do with will power.' The answer from Sears and Atkins is that it is 'nutritional science' that enables us to 'bypass our need to rely on will power.' Not quite entirely, some few days of willpower are required and then those carbohydrate cravings, those addictions, disappear: 'Now', (after the few days of willpower), 'there is no longer any need for willpower, you have remade yourself.' Shapin comments that, Atkins, Agatson and other 'low-carb' writers seek to resolve the apparent tension between, on the one hand, the idea of addiction as corroding the will and sapping resolve, and on the other, the coherence of making an appeal to fat people's wills.

Greg Critser, trying to find some balance between personal responsibility and the pressures of consumer capitalism, talks of 'self-indulgence' as being the 'number one ideology in the United States.' Steven Shapin, talking of the change in tone of diet books from 1967 to the recent present says of Dr Stillman's willpower emphasis that 'since the late 1960s that tone has rarely, if ever been represented on bestseller charts.' This he says should come as no surprise in the present cultural clime which involves 'the submergence of notions of individual volition, partly in ideas of external or genetic determination, but also through the straightforward rejection of the notion that self-control is either instrumentally necessary or morally desirable.'

Such a wholesale rejection of the notion of self-control as a virtue should have Huntington and other armchair Spartans frothing at the mouth and pinning it on that handy Sodom and Gomorrah catch-all, the 1960s. The combination of sexual liberation, a counter-culture, and the political voice and benefits given to blacks and the poor at this time freaked out – as they said then – conservative capitalist America. Huntington, Daniel Moynihan, Irving Kristol, Charles Murray, it is from this point that they set about setting up their network of think tanks, institutes, media outlets and political organisation in systematic fashion.

In his series *The Power of Nightmares*, Adam Curtis was perhaps too modest to make reference to a rather more subversive series he had made previously on individually-directed consumer capitalism (going 'beyond' mass production), how important this was to subsequent economic growth, and how it arose. Conservative capitalist America did not just set up think tanks and finance University chairs in its favoured subjects, it terrorised a radical generation. Prisoners, students and black activists were assassinated. A radical of a much earlier age – Wilhelm Reich – died in a federal penitentiary, but before his incarceration he had begun to popularise techniques of finding-your-inner-self. Many of the radical generation had already themselves taken up such techniques as part of a politico-cultural practice. Curtis argues that after the period of terror, social change via individual self-realisation became an end in itself, a rationalisation for dropping out of a politics that had been terrorised, and that more cynical people developed a whole series of marketing techniques directed at the notion of self-realisation: flattery of the consumer. This generation of 'self-indulgent' consumers is perhaps disliked by Huntington; disliked rather than hated like the poor, but disliked all the same: Clinton's baby-boomers. In a parallel world in the very same world however, these consumers have been lionised. 'We need all the yuppies we can muster,' finance wiseguy Ed Yardemi said at the time of the East Asian financial crisis of 1997-8. Later, Americans in general became the 'consumers of last resort', heroes of the global economy, saving it from recession. That such a flip turnover of the traditional 'banker of last resort' should become common usage is revealing in itself. 'Self-indulgence', that absence of restraint and sacrifice, becomes a capitalist virtue in a context of a deficiency in global demand and thus the realisation of profit. A virtue when for a period too many global low wage earners produced too much stuff they could not afford to buy. There were less witty renditions. Rupert Murdoch's hatchet man Irwin Stelzer had it as 'US consumers will keep the world afloat' (*Sunday Times* 27.9.98) and pedestrian Al Gore's USA as 'importer of last resort,' but the gist

was the same, there was even a smirk to it. At the same time, economist Jeffrey Sachs was talking of 'the deterioration in the balance sheet of the typical US household.' Hardly surprising when as he put it, 'Remuneration for America's workers has not been high enough to support consumption without borrowing.' The leaders of the 'stern white man' posse it turned out were lax in the financial world; deregulation galore and high levels of personal debt. Looked at chronologically, there is again a link between the two phenomena. In Britain for example the period of Mrs Thatcher's governments saw an explosion in personal debt, one which has continued. Something similar seems to have happened since Anglo-Saxon stalwart John Howard was elected as Prime Minister of Australia on an economically neoliberal ticket. The Australian Sun-Herald (15/8/04) reporting on a poll it had conducted with Tevener Research concluded that: 'The booming economy over the past decade has sent households into a spending frenzy, racking up the greatest level of personal debt in the country's history.' And that is both with, and without home loans. It cited Reserve Bank Governor Ian MacFarlane as saying that 'the pace of household credit growth in Australia... exceeds any reasonable benchmark by a large margin.'

Anglo-Saxon led neoliberalism, fundamentalist capitalism, with its deregulations and privatisations, has worked hard as an ideology, to trash what is called Keynesianism, which has at its core 'effective demand', relatively full employment with 'reasonable wage levels', and which is driven by, and allows for, hedonism for the masses: you only live once, or, as Keynes himself put it, 'In the long-run we are all dead.' For Keynes however, this was not to be achieved by personal debt. Rather it was to be through that totality of wages entitled 'effective demand'. For fundamental capitalism this involves the politicisation of money, in that it was a role of government to create a nexus of production and consumption. When these wages got out of hand from the point of view of capital - 'discipline' undermined as Kalecki had forecast - a variety of circumstances (both fortuitous and planned) allowed for the imposition of the neoliberal strategy. It is from this point that personal indebtedness has increased in unprecedented fashion, so that now we have a privatised Keynesianism. This kind of debt also has the potential to be a new component of discipline.

American rates of saving continued at an almost uniquely low level, and consumption on borrowed money in Britain and Australia did not slack, but from the middle of 2003 there began to be outbursts of self-righteousness in the British business press. A classic appeared in *The Independent* (26/08/03) from Stephen King, Managing Director of Economics at the HSBC banking conglomerate. The headline read 'Everyone likes a party but what happens when the music stops.' The UK is consuming too much and the increase is faster than in any other country, he wrote, 'We cannot go on like this forever'. He proceeded to list the ways in which consumers are vulnerable like the 'outsourcing' of jobs. What is especially revealing is how he characterises the over-borrowers. He makes continual reference to the drinkers of 18 pints of lager, and to clubbing and sun-seeking holidaymakers in Cyprus 'showing their naughty bits.' Quite obviously this is not a scrupulous description of the class composition of the debt he describes. Rather it is targeted not at the underclass, but working class hedonism; people like builders who the English middle class hate so much because they have irreplaceable manual skills.

In June 2004, Marianne Curphey, writing in *The Guardian* talked of Britain's 'serious addiction to debt.' She pointed out in more honest fashion that the 'good' and 'bad' debt distinction was deceptive. House prices could fall. To get a real feel however of how serious things had become, *The Economist* magazine, a cheerleader for American-led neoliberalism, paraded its worries in dramatic fashion in a 'Scares Ahead' section of its 2/10/04 issue. It found our 'stern white men' most at fault: 'Most of the countries in the Eurozone are less addicted to debt and asset-price inflation than the Anglo-Saxon world.' Addicted! Elsewhere in the article, where it questions the nature of the US economic recovery, it describes 'asset-price inflation'. 'Even as wages have stalled, consumer spending has surged by 9% supported by tax cuts and negative interest rates. Household saving has fallen to a record low of 1% of

disposable income In recent years big gains in the price of shares and then homes have boosted household wealth so they've saved less. But this is unrealistic, especially as the global house-price boom could turn to bust. Never before have real house prices been rising so fast in so many countries.' In the face of this, The Economist is reduced to banalities like, 'borrowing is not necessarily a bad thing so long as it does not get out of hand.' This is its way back into bringing responsibility back to the individual after having acknowledged the role of financial deregulation. The individual must say in so many words 'Get thee hence Satan' as the 'high street' banks urge you once again to borrow money. Or governments like Britain, keen to introduce a wider scale gambling industry into the country. Wise advice no doubt, because when the shit does hit the fan the 'consumer of last resort' the hero of yesteryear, is left to face the music alone. That it is the individual consumer who is to be punished for not showing restraint and willpower in resisting the pressures of finance and consumer capitalism, is clearly visible in the Bush administration's new law on bankruptcy. This law makes it far harder for people to apply for Chapter 7 bankruptcy and thus face the tougher demands of Chapter 13 where debtors are put on a stringent repayment schedule in which their wages are docked for years to pay off creditors. Banks and credit card companies have spent \$24 million on political donations to get this legislation passed. It is expected that it is middle class families that will be most at risk through serious illness or losing their jobs.

The possibility of losing a job is real enough. On this HSBC's Stephen King was honest enough. Outsourced is the word of choice for those who take away the jobs, and the threat of outsourcing also holds down wages which he noted as another factor in the increase in levels of debt. In the matter of work, and where it is done, there are yet more contradictions in the power elite's notion of decadence. Globalisation, in the sense that some production processes can be shifted to wherever the cheapest capable workforce can be found, does wonders for that discipline that Kalecki understood was so important to the capitalist world and its ethos. A discipline minimally defined by Charles Murray as being able to 'get up at the same time every morning.' Workers often accept lower pay and worse conditions just to keep the job. At the same time there is a nagging worry within the armchair Spartan section of the elite that the process may place too much economic power elsewhere, China especially, and also that it will make its own citizens decadent in the sense of being soft, incapable of hard work, manual work, the lessening of which has already been mentioned in relation to obesity. To the world at large however, the macho American work culture of long hours (Britain is the closest in Europe, just as it is the most 'flexible' i.e. unregulated), is proclaimed as what makes these countries 'not-decadent'. In yet another sleight of hand, decadence is defined by the power elite as not working long hours. France and its 35 hour week, is the handy punchbag. The ghastly Thomas Friedman writes of 'a world of benefits they (Western Europeans) have known for 50 years is coming apart.' This is because they, the French especially 'are trying to preserve a 35 hour work week in a world where Indian engineers are ready to work a 35 hour day.' The hyperbole alone - 'a 35 hour day'? - should be warning enough, never mind the smug racism. He concludes that 'it's a bad time for France to lose their appetite for hard work.' Meanwhile in Britain, New Labour makes it a point of principle to opt out from the 48 hour working time directive. 48 hours!

That this macho work culture has produced its own set of anxieties, when it comes to parenting and teenagers, is shunted off into a parallel world. The schoolkid massacres highlighted in Bowling for Columbine, are extreme examples of the well off children of work fanatics, of what they might do. At a less dramatic level, it is a case of too much TV and computer games, fantasy worlds that are also blamed as a cause of obesity. A father complains that his son isn't interested in hunting and fishing. A doctor, Robert Shaw, writes a big seller entitled The Epidemic: The Rot of American Culture, Absentee and Permissive Parenting and the Resultant Plague of Joyless, Selfish Children. The cure on offer is to outsource parenting and send these Selfish Children to boot camps like Turn-Around Ranch or the much debated Tranquility Bay. They do not come cheap, the parents will be titans of the long work hours culture in order to pay the \$3000 a month that is the going rate. This is makeover culture:

it is not you who ceases to be decadent 'by your own volition', but rather you are either willing, or more likely forced, to be made over by outsourced professionals heavy on punishment and reward behaviourism.

All this still does not solve the problem of hard work, there are outsourced solutions but still a nagging worry remains. As far back as 1960, John Steinbeck was worrying about it in *Travels with Charley*. 'Just as the Carthaginians hired mercenaries to do their fighting for them, we Americans bring in mercenaries to do our hard and humble work ... I hope we may not be overwhelmed one day by peoples not too proud or lazy or too soft to bend to the earth and pick up the things we eat.' It is precisely this 'bending to the earth' that is dominated by (legal and illegal) immigrant workers in Britain, people crucial to the 'flexible' labour market of its New Labour government. In 'Cheap Chinese', I looked at how, combined with a dirty political debate on immigration, wages are kept down. It is also the case that the rich world does not want to give up entirely on certain low-tech industrial processes because it does not want to produce a monopoly on low wage work elsewhere. The irony is that contesting this monopoly requires immigrant workers under constant pressure from 'immigration debates'. The realistic assumption, given the inequalities of the Anglo-Saxon world and the strategies that perpetuate it, is that only a part of the non-immigrant population, let alone the immigrant one, will have 'standards of excellence' in economically efficient professions. Any rhetoric to the contrary is simply deceptive. It is quite visible in the relentless process of American white-collar jobs that are being exported to East Asia and other parts of the developing world. As noted above, only some manufacturing process plant can be easily moved around the globe. Such blockages do not arise with hardware and software computer design, or financial services, not since the advent of economically viable telecommunications networks. Once the telecoms blockage had gone, no restraint has been shown. Saying that this is a problem only for France and other 'lazy' West Europeans, is once again, simply to ride over the contradiction.

Fundamentalist capitalism sees itself as an active force against decadence through its ideology of competition, a rosy picture of 'survival of the fittest' and economic optimums rolled into one. Leaving aside the reality of oligopolies, and the statist nature of much technological development via defence spending, it is competition that is now used as a rationale for this exporting of middle class jobs. As Brian Valentine, a Microsoft VP, puts it 'competitors already have this outsourcing religion', therefore it's time for 'Microsoft to join the party.' His eyes focused on India with its thousands of low wage graduates. By the end of 2003, more than half of Fortune 500 had shipped a significant fraction of their intellectual labour jobs offshore. This reduces the demand for native US intellectual labour which for one thing, will not ease the problem of personal indebtedness.

Fundamentalist capitalism has also seen itself as an active force against decadence because it allows, indeed makes for, social mobility. A look at changes in the education system in Britain and the USA shows what a deceit this is. The statistics of social mobility itself tell the same story. In Britain New Labour's slogan of 'Education, Education, Education' and now of 'excellence' as the only way forward for Britain in the new globalised world is undermined by the price of higher education, and the recreation of privilege in the state secondary school sector. In the USA, while – as Dion Dennis puts it – 'the notion of human capital postulates that we are all econometric risk-managers of ourselves' and with university degrees calculated as investments, students will be paying more at public universities and getting less in terms of high quality tuition. Most state legislatures are cutting their higher education budgets. This is in line with contemporary fundamentalist capitalism, and the dominant viewpoint that what is public is no good, but more cynically, it might be as Dennis puts it, 'That elites are no longer willing to subsidise American public higher education, once they have gained global access via digital communication networks, to cheap and competent intellectual labour.' This, as Greg Palast has pointed out, is in sharp contrast to the fully funded public education systems of the Indian states of Karnataka and Kerala. The very states who produce those '35 hour day

engineers' of Thomas Friedman's fantasy.

And yet! Craig Barrett, chief executive of Intel talking of why the company has invested millions in trying to improve the way science is taught in US public schools, says that while there is still 'cutting-edge' talent coming up in the US, there's not enough, and that not enough is being done about standards in these schools. Otherwise despite the absolute confidence of fundamentalist capitalism, those armchair Spartans within the power elite, must have some anxieties about the trends described. Unable to deal with the contradiction in any straightforward manner, except for the January 2004 decision to ban the outsourcing of government contracts, they focus their anxiety solely on China. That this country would be so focused was predicted nearly 100 years ago by J.A. Hobson in his *Imperialism* even if, naturally enough, he misses the added attraction to present-day Western capital of the creation of an elite global consumer class of some 200 million people. On the one hand, Hobson wrote, 'China seems to offer a unique opportunity to the European businessman. A population ... endowed with an extraordinary capacity of steady labour, with great intelligence, inured to a low standard of physical comfort ... yielding the largest surplus product of labour in proportion to their cost of keep ...'. On the other hand, 'It is at least conceivable that China might so turn the tables upon the Western industrial nations, and, either, by adopting their capital and organisers or, as is more probable, by substituting their own, might flood their markets with her cheaper manufactures, and refusing their imports in exchange, might take her payment in liens upon their capital, reversing the earlier process of investment until she gradually obtained financial control over her quondam patrons and civilizers.'

This latter prospect is real enough now, but up until now it has taken a 'benign' form. That is, the benefit of phenomenal rates of savings in China and East Asia (savings as the disciplined forgoing of instant gratification) largely goes to the USA, and supports its consumer binge by investing in the dollar even when interest rates are close to zero and, more importantly, supports the huge state investment in the military-industrial complex from which the US has derived so many successful technologies. Yet, it is still unnerving to the ideologists of decadence, the feeling that there is something profoundly wrong, weakening, about this relationship. Huntington may exclude Sino-culture from his list of offensively alien cultures. Confucianism must appeal to him – but the anxiety remains. It has now come out into the open with the Chinese oil company CNOOC's bid for the US oil company Unocal. [<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4121830.stm>]

Periodic concerns about US government borrowing from the institutions of global capitalism have become more frequent. Both its Federal budget and current-account deficit are at record levels, and the latter now exceeds US revenues from its extensive foreign investment. It has been pointed out many times that this is real Empire behaviour in that these deficits do not prevent the US lecturing others on the need for financial discipline, and usually imposing it – often to its benefit – via the IMF, or conditionalities on its own loans. It has been pointed out many times, but in this day and age of a mass media for whom fundamentalist capitalism is a given, the same truths do have to be said over and over again. Instead media concerns about these deficits do surface periodically in excitable media stories of an apocalypse. In these stories Asian savers pull out of their US Treasury bills, but then the reader is reassured that such savers still see those bills as a safer bet, and that such a pull out, crashing down the value of the dollar, would be self-defeating. I've written elsewhere about the power of the dollar ('Frankenstein and the Chickenhawks' at www.christiebooks.com) and how it has allowed the US to have its cake and eat it, and how it is a two-way process. A wiseguy military theorist Thomas Barnett of the US Naval College put it like this: 'We trade little pieces of paper (our currency in the form of trade deficit) for Asia's amazing array of products and services. We are smart enough to know this is a patently unfair deal unless we offer something of great value along with those pieces of paper. That product is a strong Pacific Fleet, which squares the transaction nicely.'

In the case of the budget deficit, tax cuts have been combined with yet another increase in military spending. This time around it has been exacerbated by the US having to pay for the Iraq invasion and occupation itself, whereas from the Gulf War, according to the Daily Telegraph (21/3/91), they made a profit squeezed from Germany, Japan and pro-Western Arab regimes. The budget deficit this time is expected to be \$475 billion. The military Keynesianism, which is such a large part of this, has to be reconciled with fundamentalist capitalism. It is not however confronted, but rather squared with an ideological sleight of hand by, for example, the authors of *Shock and Awe*, both of whom operate private 'defence' businesses. They sing of the entrepreneurial nature of the free enterprise system and paint a picture of dynamic small businesses. From this picture we get another of defence choices which are 'inexorably linked to, and dependent on profound ongoing change in the private sector and in learning to harness private sector advances in technology-related products.' No mention of the Pentagon budget or how much the process goes in the opposite direction, with so much research originating from that budget, often from American and Israeli military colleges. Still less mention that the authors have moved back and forth through the revolving doors of government, the military and entrepreneurship.

The Thomas Barnett equation – the Pacific fleet pays for the acceptance of dollars as currency – assumes not just a continuation of the Pentagon's gargantuan budget (more than the combined military budgets of the next seven big spenders), but of continued acceptable levels of conflict with which to maintain the value of this product, as well as maintaining the value of US arms sales, an area of production that has not been outsourced. The military definition of reality shared by other armchair Spartans like Huntington, Robert Kaplan and Phillip Bobbit overcomes all the contradictions described above by presenting the globalised world as an inevitably dangerous place, full of failed states, failed economies, full of too many young men without work. They may envy the willingness to sacrifice of the suicide bomber – while denigrating the motivation – but their response is faith in American military technological innovation and a response in kind. Thus Thomas Barnett in *The Pentagon's New Road Map* while hailing the US's massive advantages in the weapons and the IT sophistication says also 'we fight fire with fire. If we live in world increasingly populated by Super-Empowered individuals, then we field an army of Super-Empowered individuals.'

The USA's combined military and economic power has been most successfully used to its advantage in the behaviourist style of the boot camp, punishment and reward. Its military has a unique power to punish but, it would now seem clear, it has no unique power to occupy an invaded territory, or do a makeover job on that country. This is not the place to discuss the politics of it, the fascistic tactics and aims of some 'insurgents' for example, but to look at some of what it has revealed about the stronghold of the armchair Spartans, the US military itself.

One of Huntington's anxieties is multiculturalism in the USA itself. 'Western culture is challenged by groups within Western societies', those who do not assimilate like 'Hispanics in the USA.' And yet as Jacob Heilbrunn has pointed out, Hispanics are amongst the most patriotic Americans, constituting a significant part of the US military and this now bolstered by 'green card soldiers', often from Central America and recruited on the promise of US citizenship, the processing of which was sped up on order from George W. Bush before the Iraq invasion began. This at a time when citizenship is much harder to come by since the immigration rules imposed by the post 9-11 Department of Homeland Security.

The recruitment of mercenary soldiers has traditionally been seen as an absolute indicator of decadence, the decline of classical Athens for example, or the Carthaginians cited by Steinbeck. The armchair Spartans are all big fans of Israel (Sparta in a sea of chaos, of dangerous and inferior peoples), of its militarism and its citizen army. The USA has had to do it differently, partly perhaps because they have chosen to imprison so many young Afro-Americans rather than recruit them. Instead they have turned on the one hand to a whole host of private military companies (35 at least in

the USA according to Deborah Avant) mercenaries by the strictest definition, and the recruitment of non-Americans in to the army itself. Their enthusiasm for recruiting the indigenous people of Canada, pushed the Canadian government to complain and ask for a stop to such activity inside Canada itself. But it is the 'green card soldiers' who provide the most numbers, and they are mercenaries more in the style of the Byzantine Empire's use of Slavs as policemen in the Greek Peloponnese, and whose commitment was won by giving them land there. Either way, such recruitment has been attacked from the left as the buying up of cannon fodder, and from at least one component of the Bush-type right. In an incoherent piece in the National Review Mark Kirkorian (executive director of the Centre for Immigration Studies) while pointing out that 'military service has long been a way for new immigrant groups to prove their worthiness' is also worried. 'First of all,' he writes, 'as the proportion of non-citizens in the armed forces grows, there is the real possibility that defending America will become 'work Americans won't do' ...Not to put too fine a point on it, we should go to any lengths to avoid developing a kind of mercenary army, made up of foreigners loyal to their units and commanders but not to the Republic. It didn't work out well for the Romans.' And he goes on to cite the dangerous precedent of the San Patricio Battalion, a group of Irish immigrants in the US army who defected to fight for the enemy in the Mexican War.

This professional in the immigration paranoia business, argues that they should become citizens first in the proper way. At the same time it's important to keep this phenomenon in some perspective. There are some 37,000 green card soldiers, a relatively small percentage. Michael Lind argues that 'the groups that are truly over-represented in America's armed forces are whites from the south and west', and that they have grown in numbers relative to those from the north and north east. He makes reference to Confederate values, those same values Huntington was proclaiming in his first book. But these 'Confederate' values are not those of the Civil War when so many were prepared to die, and certainly not those of the famous Spartans led by Leonidas. The prime consideration of strategy post-Vietnam is to keep the number of Western casualties to a minimum. In addition, the 'green card soldier' would not exist if enough of those white southerners were there in the army; and this is especially significant in the context of the preparedness of the reservists in the armed forces, and what is required of the modern day soldier as described by Thomas Barnett.

The Iraq occupation has revealed the importance of reservists in the US force there. This system of reservists stems from the post-Vietnam mix of active and reserve forces designed to ensure that 'when America went to war with an all-volunteer force, home town America would have to go too.' The reservists however were to be mobilized and sent home quickly, that was the plan. In the 'war on terror' this has changed, but at the same time, a recent New York Times report (reprinted IHT 5/7/04), says that some military commanders comment in private that a number of reservists 'arrive for duty ill-prepared for the challenges they face in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, and in particular they lack specific combat skills that are required even of truck drivers in a war zone. They say the reservists also lack something more intangible but equally important: a warrior ethos.' This may constitute an 'uncomfortable truth' for those like Huntington who trade in uncomfortable truths, yet none of which has any impact on them. Huntington's chief cheerleader, Robert Kaplan, is one upon whom this lack of a warrior ethos must grate. His own book written from his berth as a 'senior fellow' at the New American Foundation, and endorsed by ex Defence Secretaries Perry and Cohen, is entitled *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership requires a Pagan Ethos*. The evidence is that the citizen part of the army just isn't up to it. What they have done, the 'white trash' element who by and large joined up to get an education they otherwise would not get, is to take the rap for the Abu Ghraib scandal. As one of those under investigation Sabrina Harman said, 'I knew nothing about the military except the fact they would pay for college.' At the bottom of the American pile (Lynndie England was a chicken-plant worker), it must have been a great temptation to lord it over Iraqis, to humiliate them, when a green light had been given for them to do so. Sexual humiliation had obviously been agreed on as a means of softening up prisoners, but in this case the contradiction with the sexual Puritanism of the armchair

Spartans was too much. In the event what was proved was the latent decadence of poor Americans and a failure of discipline. General Taguba's report talked of ineffective officers (also reservists), and painted a picture of armed soldiers wandering around the prison in civilian clothes; logbooks filled with 'unprofessional entries and flippant comments'; old friendships replacing the military chain of command; and of how the saluting of officers was 'sporadic.'

In the last couple of years in Britain, there has emerged an increasingly consistent attack on what is labelled a 'blame culture'. This has focused on No Win, No Fee legal cases, and more generally on an inclination to hold people in power responsible for their actions. Intellectuals have been roped in to attack it, and talk of life as being full of risk and that's the way it is. Nina Bawden's impassioned account of the Hatfield train crash in which her husband was killed, pin pricks this bought-up notion of risk as a fact of life. The crash was wholly avoidable. And yet the attack on a 'culture of blame' continues, and, like the attacks on a 'politics of envy', is a case of the power elite and its professional rationalisers getting the boot in first. For it is they who indulge in a politics of blame: parents if their children are at all overweight; teachers if targets imposed by armchair teachers are not reached; debtors who have not resisted the temptation. What this does is to avoid confronting realities of both capitalist practice in the areas of food and finance, and the governments own practice in allowing sink schools for 'sink' estates, as a Minister has recently been complacent enough to describe them. In Britain the total amount of credit card lending doubled in just the 4 years 2000 to 2004. Commentators say something must be done, but nothing is done because fundamentalist capitalism would in its essentialist way, be threatened by any controls. Instead the professional rationalisers are wheeled out to say that people are, of course, quite free to reject the constant stream of offers. When a banking regulator, Seymour Foretscue, does criticise bank and credit penalty charges, he stresses it is only in a personal capacity, rather like ex-President Eisenhower warning of the dangers of the military-industrial complex only when he was out of power in 1961.

When it comes to food and diet, the World Health Organisation has been accused of burying a report recommending that curbs on junk food advertising be incorporated into global standards. Meanwhile in Britain, the food industry is calling for 'partnership' rather than regulation, and getting it. Both it and the government have used the rhetoric of 'informed consumers'. Given that they are informed, and 'choice' is constantly asserted as the dominant virtue, it will be down to parents especially, to say 'Get Thee Hence Satan' on behalf of their children or themselves. What we get instead, is posturing. In Britain we have A Prime Minister who acts out sacrifice. A style has developed of taking on carefully picked, but rightfully hostile audiences, so that we can see what he suffers on behalf of the greater good. In the USA, President Bush is rather an exemplar of the make-over. Digital Medea spell out the process. It is not just boot camps but a whole raft of TV shows in Britain and the USA. Both participants and audience want to be assessed by experts, not just assessed but punished for having whatever problem they are diagnosed as having. In the TV shows, the problem is outsourced to professionals who swoop in and do the business. 'On a compressed time schedule, all the better to fit programme schedules but also to assure us that this is all rather easy and therefore can be sufficiently imagined, the team sets out to Fix the Problem.' The attractions are obvious. Work is created for make-over professionals and as Shapin says of diet, notions of individual volition can be ditched. Or rather as Digital Medea put it, it is 'outsourced self-help.' In the case of President Bush in addition to the Christian narrative of selective redemption, from alcohol and drugs to serious and devout family man, there is, they say, that voice: from Yale man to down-home Texan. A triumph for the outsourced professionals on the job.

To avoid the contradictions between the resolute Spartan and the soft consumer, stern white men elites go in for both victim blame, and for defining decadence on their own terms, namely: an unwillingness to work very long hours, often without overtime pay. This enables them to outsource decadence itself – to France. It also involves a nasty mix of fantasy, and the possibility of realizing such fantasy,

including an uneasy inclination to outsource Spartan qualities to Israel. This too involves fantasy: it leaves out the high level of emigration from, and financial corruption in that state, the 'deteriorating standards' of its army remarked on by its reluctantly retired chief, Moshe Yaalon, and its 'criminal subculture that had reached officer class.' In reality, the armchair Spartans like their comforts too. Look no further than Vice President Cheney. Cheney, the 'pagan warrior' with the contracts. All Kaplan is looking for with his 'Pagan ethos', is to be brutal without limits. Bagram, Guantanamo and Abu Gharib have done their bit, now torture too is being outsourced to hardline 'pagans'. The realisation of their fantasies will be based both on the power to punish (a power Mr Blair takes a great interest in), and their investment in the technological fix. For the obese (with obesity spreading out beyond the poor), there is already stomach stapling, and soon, the hoodia plant, taken from Kalahari bushmen for a pittance. Turned into a product its promise is to lose weight with no willpower involved. Investment in robotics and AI, both civilian and military – how comforting to have no need of the decadent, but potentially dangerous servant class – is on its way to realising the dream of heterosexually characterised hoplite robots. This in addition to the development of bunker-buster bombs and small scale nuclear weapons. In January 2005, it was announced that the US planned to deploy 18 armed robots in Iraq. They have their drawbacks – they are slow and need refuelling every few hours – but their advantages as described by Dan Glaister are clear.

'They are cheap and require no food; they can be packed away between campaigns; they are unlikely – barring modifications – to write anguished letters to loved ones or the media. They are also a much better shot than the average GI, and can fire between 300-350 rounds per minute.'

And the need for them is urgent. A recent Wall Street Journal report describes an internal Army memo sent to battalion commanders discouraging them from attempting to dismiss recruits for drug or alcohol abuse or poor fitness. This is because the drop-out rate, and a failure to meet recruitment targets has become a matter of concern. One commander refers to specifically to guys on 'weight-control' taking up a lot of his time. Another referred to recruiters under pressure to meet quotas – as if they were on the disappearing assembly lines of the country – and dropping standards. 'There are guys showing up at units with physical problems or other issues who you would not have seen a couple of years ago.' Other than the robots, the alternatives would seem to be unacceptable: prison amnesties or a return of the draft, both would make the contradictions of decadence rhetoric unavoidable. Similarly the domino-effect of a house price crash in the Anglo-Saxon world. The stern white man's media-abetted monopoly on 'hard truths' would be shaken. It would be good to have a hand in the shaking, and the time is ripe. President Bush, some 16 months after his use of the 'D' word, has had to make another speech on the occupation of Iraq, this time at the Fort Bragg army base. His cynical use of the 9/11 attack in the speech has been widely commented on. What really stands out however are the words 'sacrifice', the need for it; 'resolve', the need for it; 'our will', the certainty of it. Such things would not have to be said if the elite's monopoly power to define such characteristics were not so threatened by the realities of reality.