Carnival of Distractions 3

OVERVIEW:

It is an old cliche to suggest that we're all just pawns in a gigantic scheme.This is not to say it is imprudent to be suspicious of "the powers that be".But it is actually more accurate to say that there is NOT some elaborate "conspiracy" required for power structures to maintain themselves as they do. There is no conspiracy because there doesn't need to be a conspiracy.Power is inherently self-aggrandizing.When we observe systems of domination / exploitation, we need only recognize that this is simply how power structures work—of their own accord.The proverbial "puppet master" is an emergent property of the system, not some calculating homunculus operating from on high.

Once we understand this, we see that there is not some globally-orchestrated, diabolical plot to control the world. It is just the nature of the Machine: Those with power will tend to employ that power to maintain that power. (The simple corollary of this: The wealthy few tend to use their wealth to accumulate as much wealth as possible for themselves…even at the expense of everyone else's well-being.)

By sheer dint of natural selection (applied to institutions rather than to organisms), those who derive privilege from a system will be inclined to leverage their incumbant privilege to "rig" that system to favor incumbent privilege. Like natural selection, this is neither an immoral nor a moral force; it is categorically amoral in nature.

Such a process requires no "wizard behind the curtain": no Bilderbergers, no Illuminati, no Freemasons; just the natural pull of power in its various forms (social, financial, and political). Ergo the Club For Growth, The Business Roundtable, and Goldman Sachs. There is absolutely nothing mysterious about this. In fact, it is no more mysterious than gravity.

Power is like matter: it has its own gravitation.Thus, power attracts power—and does so in proportion to its mass.In other words, centers of power attract satellites of power in proportion to how much of it is concentrated in one place.The greater the concentration, the stronger the pull.Like matter, a center of power boasts ever-stronger pull as it accumulates—increasing its ability to attract other "fragments" of power.

Like matter, power is perpetually working to consolidate itself—under the pull of its own gravity.If you don't have much power, highly-concentrated centers of power won't pay much attention to you.You're a peripheral detail—inconsequential.The more power you accumulate, though, the more you are "on the radar"…and thus the more centers of power will be motivated to incorporate you into their own "mass".

Gravity requires no conspiracy.Power structures don't require a "puppet master" any more than does matter itself when it attracts other matter.The point, then, is to understand the nature of power.It relentlessly works to consolidate itself because that's simply what power does.No conspiracy required.You are thus either incorporated into the centers of power, or you are ensured to not have much "mass".

By "incorporated", here, it is meant "assimilated".By being deprived of mass, it is meant "marginalized". Therefore, if you want power, you will—by definition—render yourself something that is drawn to power centers.The more highly-concentrated those centers of power are, the stronger their pull will be.The more "mass" you accumulate, the stronger you will be pulled.

So while others are concocting their conspiracy theories, those of us who actually understand how things work will refrain.We'll refrain because we recognize that such theories aren't required to explain what's going on.And THAT is precisely why the NON-conspiracy theorists are the biggest threat to the established order.

THE "CATCH":

In order for things to proceed in this manner without "hiccups", the rabble needs to be kept distracted (read: kept occupied with amusements).In this way, those in the "working class" can remain resigned to their inferior lot in life—always captivated by the illusion that, one day, they too could be part of the privileged few that they've been conditioned to revere.(This is called, "The American Dream".)Part of the Carnival of Distractions is therefore a ubiquitous portrayal of the this "dream"—a romantic vision of why, just maybe, "it's all worth it in the end."Hopefully.

In the meantime, centers of power are sanctified as symbols of what awaits us if we "play our cards right". To begrudge those centers, we're tempted to conclude, would only be to shoot ourselves in the foot. "That's what we should be coveting, not resisting," we're inclined to say (as we glorify the fortune we implicitly seek).

Even then, though, some people—the more incredulous—may be suspicious of the established order.So the rabble is given a plausible diversion: the (legitimate) concern about highly concentrated power in the form of State power.This way, many people will fail to be concerned about the other form in which power can become highly concentrated: private power (e.g. corporate power). This is a classic strategy of misdirection.Keep ‘em paranoid about tyrannical STATE power, and—presto—they’ll be none the wiser to other systems of domination and exploitation.

By remaining distracted, the rank and file will oblige the powers that be. Here, we allow our concerns to be diverted away from those representing this hallowed vision–the very ones who promise that the “American Dream” may be just around the corner. The future may hold fortune in store for those of us who just “play along”; so we play along.Power may then proceed unperturbed. (That is to say, it may proceed with its process of perpetual consolidation.)

To call this a “conspiracy”, therefore, is to miss the point.This is simply power structures doing what power structures do: accumulate power for themselves.No puppet master required.

THE CARNIVAL:

Thomas Jefferson once said, “All tyranny needs to gain a foothold is for people of good conscience to remain silent.”Replace “silent” in that statement with “distracted”, and it captures what is happening in contemporary society.

We Americans are constantly distracted by the next fabricated spectacle.We have become accustomed to reading perfervid prose, engaging in banal banter, and being captivated by whatever inane thing is flashed before us.Our days are spent occupying ourselves with superficial concerns while attending to the mundane tasks of everyday life.Some of us seem to devote every spare moment to fixating on even the most petty matters. We do so under the impression that “this is what life is all about”.We’ve become so accustomed to such a way of life that we have little time / energy left to attend to…other matters.

As the power elite provides us with the Carnival of Distractions, we drown in the saccharine quagmire of our quotidian cares.We’ve become completely habituated to watching vapid chit-chat shows on TV and listening to insipid talking-heads ramble on about the latest “hot topic”.It rarely occurs to us that much of this is fatuous

theater.When media performers who are flagrantly ignorant regularly land big-league gigs as “commentators”, we know something is disastrously wrong with MSM.

…And when an imbecile like Wolf Blitzer is employed at a major network (CNN) as one of their major hosts, we know network standards have become egregiously low.As Alex Pareene of Salon.com put it: “Wolf Blitzer might be the single dumbest person on television. You can tell, listening to his verbal diarrhea-style of breaking news narration, that he’s paid to fill airtime with talk, not communicate ideas.” But with our sensibilities as they are, this is the new normal. We’ve become inured to imbecility, so long as it’s wearing an expensive suit and holds forth from a snazzy television studio.

Indeed, things need to be dumbed-down, stage-managed, and melo-dramatized in order to maintain mass appeal.Every trivial thing needs to be sensationalized to the nth degree—lest the program not cater to the rabble’s pedestrian inclinations.Careful, methodical, honest reporting is not entertaining enough to get high ratings these days.So such reporting is sumarily relegated to the margins. That’s perfectly fine with the plebians, so long as they remain entertained. This isn’t an elaborate conspiracy; it’s just good business.

Many of us are enthralled by every spectacle; so that’s precisely what is provided, everywhere, all the time.With a chronic preoccupation with the salacious and the scandalous, we eagerly await the next juicy scoop—no matter how inconsequential it may be for the world.We are spectacle-fetishists. Therefore, manufactured spectacle is exactly what MSM delivers, day in and day out (in place of reporting anything that actually matters). Business is business. Market forces dictate programming.

Indeed, sensationalized fluff comprises the standard business-plan of any media outlet that wants to maintain a “presence”.Any serious journalism is thereby marginalized (or drowned out by the incessant din of info-tainment). Canned responses to inane questions is now the norm on most mainstream “discussion” programs.Viewers satiate their craving to be entertained, and walk away satisfied (yet completely un-edified).Naturally, then, the corporate-run media caters to prevailing tastes, even as it regularly defaults on journalistic responsibility. That’s where the money is.

We can speak of what those in power (e.g. Leo Strauss) have called “necessary illusions”–useful myths for keeping the rabble “in line”. This amounts to a grand narratives that incentivizes everyone to go along with the established order. Throughout history, religion has traditionally played this role. But now we have modern media to keep people enthralled en masse. Indeed, people experience an illusion of empowerment when they get to choose which smart phone they can buy…or which wallpaper to use for their blog’s background…or which insurance company they get to get bilked by each year. We’d rather plug in to our i-pods than do something inconvenient–like stand up to the Machine. We can thus remain smug within our pre-fab ideological caccoons, kick back, and watch Dancing With The Stars. We can even cheer our favorite sports team and pick which model SUV to drive, content in the knowledge that we have the “freedom” to fend for ourselves in a draconian marketplace.

We Americans have been completely seduced by the Carnival of Distractions.We pine for fashionable handbags, hanker for sleek sports cars, and crave celebrity gossip. We are transfixed by each dramatic “scandal”–as if each dirty detail was of paramount importance for the future of our species. We are infatuated with glamour and decadence–and so consume accordingly. We demand to be constantly entertained–though we care very little about actually learning anything new (unless it will get us a promotion).

As a result, “news” has been rendered little other than a consumer product (something to be hawked in the media marketplace) and political candidates have been rendered brands (like a shelf of breakfast cereals from which we may select our favorite). The most prized freedom is the freedom to consume (especially if we’re consuming religion or trendy clothes or political policies). The law of supply and demand dictates that we will simply get what we ask for. So the marketplace delivers.

Our fascination with the prurient and the scandalous seems to know no bounds.We demand to be titillated. But we need not delve into all the rest of the vapid blah that pop culture offers in order to make the present point.So what I turn to now is one of the predominant environs in which the Carnival of Distractions thrives.

THE BLOGOSPHERE:

Among other things, the blogosphere can be accurately described as an orgy of charlatanry.One need only devote a day surveying the vast assortment of “sites” to conclude that most bloggers are self-important mountebanks.But this fact poses little problem for the denizens of most virtual forums.For each blog serves as an echo-chamber for like-minded ideologues—thereby fragmenting the demos into insular factions.The “divide and conquer” strategy has never worked so marvelously well.

Within the blogosphere, a typical exchange is little other than an exhibition of well-delivered sound-bites tailored to suit the taste of its designated target audience.At any given venue, “followers” may derive daily gratification from having their pre-established views perpetually validated—and their demonized interlocutors summarily harangued.To this end, inter-blog feuds provide endless fodder.Participants level invective at one-another for maximum theatrical effect. (This could be called the “Breitbart Syndrome”.)

What sells?Contentious jibes, memorable barbs, anything that will attract attention…and provoke “the other side”.In the blogosphere, vituperative polemic is par for the course…no matter how ridiculous it may be.Consequently, political debate is reduced to a rhetorical pissing contest.In a way, the blogosphere is an arena; sophistry is the sport.(Participation, we find, is simply a matter of getting in a quick rhetorical jab before the interlocutor volleys a snappy come-back in return.) We pick political platforms the way we pick favorite sports teams–then cheer them on in a similar fashion. We win, you lose. Either way, the powers that be continue their inexorable process of consolidation.

Amidst all the rants and tirades, we often lose sight of the human context of the issues being discussed.No matter.The point of the game is to generate maximum traffic…so one can make money (e.g. off of ads).Within this cacophony of rhetorical sparring, few people ever actually learn anything.Dialogue becomes performance art—an excuse to have a media presence.Everyone wants to appear on the stage.Few ever want to listen. Meanwhile, power continues to become ever-more concentrated in the hands of the well-positioned few.

This environment leads to a drastic degeneration of the public discourse.Amidst this Carnival of Distractions, our standards for ratiocination and discussion have become so low as to warrant grave concern.A barometer for this devolution is “ratings”: tracking what sorts of figures the masses tend to actually pay attention to. So we should ask: What ARE most of us paying attention to?

The assessment is tremendously disturbing.TIME magazine's "Most Important People" of 2011 is a case in point.According to this (often absurd) ranking, corporatist shill (and bona fide idiot) Paul Ryan was number three…and none other than Kate Middleton (now-wife of the Prince of Whales) was number four.(You read that right: According to America's most popular news magazine, a British socialite / aristocrat is the fourth most important person IN THE WORLD.)

This is nothing short of flabbergasting.

TIME magazine was sufficiently audacious to go so far as to call Paul Ryan a "prophet".(Indeed, he is a "prophet" in the sense that, say, L. Ron Hubbard was a "prophet".)If someone like Ryan plays a major role in our public discourse, we are—to put it mildly—courting severe dysfunction.Calling an obsessive Ayn Rand acolyte a "prophet" (when everything about his economic ideology has been conclusively proven wrong) is analogous to calling Harold Camping a "prophet".(Only worse, actually.Even Camping's nutty views about the impending Rapture didn't almost destroy the entire nation's economy.)

In a civil society, such an obvious hack would be dismissed out of hand, not heralded as one of the key players in national politics—by a major news source.Alas, the powers that be are all-too-eager to push supply-side economic policy (and a figure like Ryan is a useful vehicle).Mission Accomplished. The supply-siders prevail, and power continues to be increasingly concentrated…while everyone else is left to fend for themselves.

The joke is on the rabble. But the rabble is too entertained to notice.The masses remain thoroughly amused—while the oligarchs laugh all the way to the bank.And so it goes.

THE CONCLUSION:

So how shall we proceed?Two questions arise: Are there any possible "checks" on highly-concentrated power—ways to prevent power structures from becoming malignant?Is there a mechanism by which power structures may be prevented from dominating / exploiting those outside of their internal scope of operation?

Yes.And: yes.It's called participatory democracy.But only the general populace can elect to invoke such a mechanism—and it must do so pro-actively.In other words, the rank and file must employ this mechanism actively, with steadfast resolve, and without relent.Insofar as the rabble is passive, power will continue to do what power

does: amalgamate.This amalgamation will transpire while all those “outside” it are summarily subordinated to those “within”.The insiders win; the outsiders lose.It’s that simple.The key, then, is to prevent power from becoming too highly concentrated—from accumulating too much in any given place.

This is not easy to do, because, like mass, power doesn’t want to be dispersed. If power centers don’t use overt force, the other option is distraction. (As any scam artist will profess: the best way to manipulate people is to convince them that they’re not being manipulated.) It’s not all smoke and mirrors. Much of it is in plain view, if we care to just look and see.

Keeping power sufficiently distributed is like working against the gravitational pull of a star.It is only possible if one takes the initiative. The first step is to not allow ourselves to be distracted by things that–ultimately–should not matter.At the end of the day, participatory democracy is a more powerful force than even gravity.