

Opportunities (we wish we never had)

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It takes no time to get from groveling and obsequiousness to self-righteous indignation.

Everyone is denouncing the late wealthy sexual predator. Some use the occasion to “make hay” of the opportunity: one announces that he will move his operation from the famous Media Lab at MIT; another (keeping her group within the Media Lab) begs to be acknowledged for her vigilance. The exclusive Edge “club” of geniuses indulged in caviar and champagne at the billionaire’s dinners with the same gusto that its members now indulge in feeling sorry for themselves. “Thanks” to the suicide, one billionaire discovered that millions had been stolen from him. So many of the super-smart on the edge of stardom (even sainthood) deplore that their self-styled naiveté was taken advantage of. Lots of folk would love to see some heads roll — the media does a good guillotine job.

Let’s take it easy: money opened, to this odious character, as to others before him, the doors to the most guarded addresses in Silicon Valley, on Wall Street, in Hollywood, at Harvard, Stanford, and MIT. Albeit, the money in question is not the outcome of his deviant behavior, but rather the fuel that kept him, and his gang, going. Whether it is tainted money — a suspicion weighing on the stupidity of many of his cohorts — or not, will eventually be established. BUT (and this is a big but): returning the money, donations or not, or resigning, will not bring justice to those who were abused. And will not make America more moral. To deplore having sought his influence, even for legitimate causes, is as vacuous as it is demagogical.

These lines are by no means meant to whitewash a character whom we wish existed only on some theater stage or in a movie. Many have suffered, and may still suffer, from having a bastard ruin their lives. Yes, there were enough underage girls seeking glory in satisfying someone’s monstrous sexual appetite. As there were scientists and artists tickled to get his divided attention. The money from the devil *du jour* might not be not tainted — at least to the extent so far revealed during the legal process. There is a huge amount of money from sources providing questionable “services” that the new “I feel sorry that ...”, “My fault ...”, “We regret...” choir took advantage of, disregarding principles of integrity. As a matter of fact, the labs of many universities, and many start-ups of recent history have been living on disbursements from dubious patrons. For the record: the money of the wars they have abetted and of the surveillance society for which they have delivered the goods weighs much more heavily. Thank God, the military does not (yet) expect to have institutes, buildings, and endowed chairs named after its generals.

Any observer of the digital revolution, including those addicted to their cell phones (all hacked, no doubt about this) and to an endless number of gizmos and apps, will realize that the ubiquity of computation is equaled only by how vulnerable it has made society. Democracy — if we ever really had one — was sacrificed on the altar of expensive political games — which society pays for. The wars that the USA has carried on are not possible without computers and the technology developed for waging them. America is weaponizing the world in order to justify fighting endless wars which are, ultimately, the engine of our prosperity. The profoundly dangerous

undermining of democracy through indiscriminate surveillance of citizens is also the product of digital know-how bordering on the infamous. Research is increasingly a service to the military and intelligence communities. It is almost never an expression of ethical responsibility for the long-term consequences of new science and technologies. We teach the young and less young of our nation (and of other nations) the violence of games, and then wonder why America is the world champion in crime (sex-related or any other). Almost unlimited possibilities have been unleashed — “unlimited” referring here to the good and the bad, to saving lives or destroying them. Demonizing one or another character, playing the charade of remorse, while not addressing the larger picture of hijacked ethics, will at best satisfy some instinct for revenge. The Epstein saga is only part of a larger picture, to which the opioid crisis and the never-ending shootings belong, as well. The opioid crisis is more than Johnson & Johnson or the Sackler family. Every new shooting incident is more than the label we attach to the perpetrators. It is the America of many self-inflicted wounds. That money — on which greedy lawyers lay their eyes — is as tainted as that of the wars that the new science and technology have been making possible.

If we are to get clean, this is, yet again, the time to do it. Tainted money, from commissions with blood on the hands of those who signed off, made the MIT Media Lab (for example) what it is. In the 1980s, “We look, they die” was the cynical caption for a demo of a system of high efficiency war invented there. Let’s open the books on who made remote killing — the drones are now guided by some fancy AI — that took out not only enemies, but many innocent children and mothers. To disassociate today from a pathological character, or from those who turned a legitimate drug into a greed-feeding machine, or from some killer (mentally disturbed or not) of innocents, is easy. The proper goal should be to affirm an ethics that has been missing for a long time.

The theatrics of regret and public gestures of remorse cover up the larger picture of a corrupt science, and of corrupt celebrities who became accomplices to what the America of greed became. If we do not use the opportunity, we might one day look back and wish for a choice that we still have — total transparency. Time to clean up. If America means anything to us, let it be what many hoped it would become, and not what more and more people, at home and abroad, respect less and less, or are even learning to hate.