# CounterPunch: APRIL 5, 2019

# [Complicity](https://www.counterpunch.org/2019/04/05/complicity/)by [MIKE MILLER](https://www.counterpunch.org/author/swubet4/)

**Preface**

In “[Opioids and the State of the Union](https://www.counterpunch.org/2017/10/31/opioids-and-the-state-of-the-union-2017/)”\* I described the crisis of opioid addiction, and the failure of anyone to do anything about it until 60 Minutes and The Washington Post blew the whistle on the pharmaceutical industry, particularly McKesson, that was pushing the pills, and the failure of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to do anything about it.  That article concluded with my calling out many other parties who I argued were complicit in its epidemic- proportion abuse.

The recent crashes of two Boeing 737 Max 8 passenger jets, leading to the death of all those aboard, made me think more widely about the question of complicity, and its broader meaning for American politics and society.  And that reminded me of the Challenger space shuttle catastrophe. The following is the result of these further ruminations.

**What Is Complicity?**

To be complicit is to go along with something you know is wrong, to turn away when you know you should be looking straight ahead, not to rock the boat when it badly needs rocking.  How should we think about this?

Writing in [Truthdig](https://www.truthdig.com/articles/complicit-americas-non-war-crimes-yemen/), former West Point history instructor Major Danny Sjursen says of both Presidents Obama and Trump’s policies, “The United States is failing in Yemen (and the entire Middle East, for that matter) ethically and strategically. America is complicit in the collapse of an impoverished, failed state that will undoubtedly breed generations of hopeless, displaced young men of the sort ripe for terrorist recruitment.”

The 1986 Space Shuttle Challenger disaster was the result of a technical failure.  Alan McDonald, Director of the Space Shuttle Solid Rocket Motor Project for the engineering contractor Morton Thiokol, had expressed concern regarding the rocket’s O-ring’s safety; he refused a night-before sign-off for launch.  He was ignored.  He subsequently made his concerns public, and was removed from his job and demoted. Later vindication by the Presidential Commission that investigated the accident got him reinstated and placed in charge of redesign of solid rocket motors. Morton Thiokol was repentant; that’s better than most corporate bad guys.

[McDonald later said](https://www.nasa.gov/centers/langley/news/researchernews/rn_Colloquium1012.html), “In my career, I don’t know how many times people have raised their hand and said, ‘This may be a dumb question, but…’  I always stood up and said, ‘In my entire career I’ve never, ever heard a dumb question. I’ve heard a lot of dumb answers.’” He expressed concern that professionals don’t feel comfortable raising professional opinionsin their field of competency.

McDonald was a whistle-blower, a prophet if you will.  He fared better than most.  Their typical fate is ostracism by peers, isolation or firing by employers, perhaps a brief day in news media, then disappearance.

Whistle-blowing is institutionalized in muckraking journalism and public interest organizations like those created by Ralph Nader.  Often with little funding to do their work, they combine determined independent research with insider tips to expose political and corporate evils.  Unfortunately, their exposés usually come after the damage is done leaving those victims who aren’t dead and their families the recourse of lawsuits and financial compensation.

In his article “Systems As God Intends and Humanity Corrupts” written almost ten years ago (Social Policy Magazine; Autumn, 2001), Presbyterian evangelical theologian Robert C. Linthicum tells us when systems “as God intended them” (political, “to work for justice”; economic, “to be faithful stewards of the nation’s wealth so that there could be an equitable distribution…in order to eliminate poverty”, and religious “value-sustaining” to establish a “relational culture”) stray from their God-intended purposes.  When systems go astray, the political becomes a system of oppression; the economic, one of exploitation; the religious one of control (of the people for the powers-that-be).

Linthicum identifies potential forces for reform:  “the prophet, the people and God”.  But the prophets, Ezekiel tells us, “’have smeared whitewash on (the systems’) behalf…’ (22:28).  The prophets have been seduced… [T]hose that weren’t are slandered, shunned, persecuted or killed!”  Ezekiel then writes (22:29) of the people, they “have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress”.  Finally, left with no force for salvation, Ezekiel writes (22:31) “I have poured out my indignation upon them; I have returned their conduct upon their heads, says the Lord God.”

Linthicum concludes,

Whether we are Christians, Jews, other peoples of faith, or those who love democracy and justice, the biblical witness can help us articulate a vision of public life lived at its highest, an analysis which enables us to understand evil as public and systemic as well as private and individual, and the commitment to work together in our public life toward a society which is truly relational and just, seeking a shared stewardship of the earth’s resources “so that there will be no poor among you.” (Deut. 15:4) This is the vision that will enable us to turn our society’s public life “upside-down”!

Sjursen’s approach is the typical one:  it is public officials or corporate executives who are responsible for or complicit with evil.  Thus in the opioid crisis we typically read about pharmaceutical companies’ greed, and elected politicians and regulatory agencies being bought.  In the recent 737 Max 8 crashes, critics point to Boeing’s haste in getting its plane on the market, optional, safety measures that should be mandatory, airline laxity in pilot training or cost-cutting, and FAA’s cozy relationship with the airline industry.  In the Challenger disaster, it was corporate malfeasance and political pressure to get the launch off while the world’s media were watching.

**Where Are The People?**

For the most part, Americans rely on corporations to do right, politicians and regulators to make sure they do right, and journalists, whistle-blowers and public interest organizations to expose the failures of incumbent power/the status quo/the power elite or whatever it is called to do right.  If the politicians aren’t doing right, then throw the incumbents out (and, for the most part, replace them with different politicians who will do more-or-less what those they replaced were doing because the relations of power have not changed— a point to which I will shortly return).

Having replaced them only to get more-or-less the same result, a consumer electorate–one that is not engaged in an ongoing way with civic life and that may show up to vote–gets to complain and be victims, and becomes more alienated. The result is the anti-politician:  Ronald Reagan, Donald Trump, and whomever next plays the role by promising to throw the bums out, and who appears sufficiently separate from them to do it.

There are occasions when the evil is so heinous, so persistent or so aggravating that people are mobilized to protest.  Those who usually mobilize them are either the politicians just described who want their vote, or activists for whom a particular issue or candidate is their interest or passion.  I know many of these activists; they include some of my best friends.  Their commitment to social and economic justice and their ability on occasion to mobilize significant numbers of people and win important campaigns is not in dispute here.  But what they do is insufficient. In the best of circumstances, protest forces the status quo to make concessions.  They may be important concessions, but the structure of power and the relations of power remain the same.

Mobilizations by activists that win (or fail to win) significant concessions from the powers-that-be are the legend of social movements:  “The Battle of Seattle”, “Paris, 1968”, “Tiananmen Square”, “Martyr (Tahrir) Square,” “The March on Washington”, “Earth Day”.  There are many.  What they share in common, whether won or lost, is that after the day was done, most participants went home.  The activists, perhaps now larger in number, remained.  No on-going mass-based participatory structure was created to enforce what was won or learn from what was lost.  No continuing relationship of negotiations was created that could encroach on the prerogatives of status quo power.  Thus it was impossible to wage an ongoing struggle—who gets to decide what, when and under what terms.  There was no army in being for the long march through the institutions  that is required for the creation of a real democracy. Or, if you prefer, to put it in the terms of Antonio Gramsci, to expand the war of position.

**Changing The Relations of Power**

In Salt of the Earth,the McCarthy-era blacklisted film, a largely Mexican-American workforce strikes a zinc mine in southwest New Mexico.  Efforts to break the strike fail.  Toward the film’s conclusion, a new, shiny, Cadillac appears.  Plant Superintendent Alexander and “Mr. Hartwell”, sent to the scene by corporate headquarters in New York City, arrive. Pickets block the car’s progress. Hartwell characterizes them as “childish”.  Alexander responds, “…they’re like little children in many ways.  Sometimes you have to humor them, sometimes you have to spank them—and sometimes you have to take their food away”:  the contempt of the powerful for the powerless.

After it becomes clear the strike can’t be broken by evictions, strikebreakers and jail, Alexander looks at Hartwell to see what’s next.  “I’ll talk to New York.  Maybe we better settle this thing…(he puffs on his cigarette)…For the present.”

A similar scene took place in reality at the end of the General Motors auto workers 1936 Flint sit-down strike.  GM’s efforts to break the strike failed.  The company was forced to deal with the union, with this result:a contract that gave the newly-organized United Automobile Workers (UAW) sole bargaining rights in 17 struck plants for six months. All workers fired for union activities were rehired.  Negotiations began on wages and working conditions. During the six-month window, the UAW signed up a majority of GM workers, which fulfilled the recently passed Wagner Act requirement of majority support to obtain recognition. As a result, UAW was established as the sole representative for all GM workers.

In his book [John L. Lewis:  An Unauthorized Biography](https://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1163189898/counterpunchmaga), Saul Alinsky describes an immediate post-contract signing scene in which a GM executive says to Lewis, head of the industrial union movement that was responsible for the Flint victory (and here I paraphrase), “Mr. Lewis, you may have beaten us this time, but there will be another round.”

In these two cases, the day afterward the participants didn’t go home, leaving the activists to continue the battle.  Instead they formed a democratic union with a rich infrastructure of worksite “shop stewards”, union locals at each of the plants, and an international union that brought them all together.  More-or-less the same thing happened in other major industries.  It took the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, the McCarthy era, and a relentless assault on unions to finally reverse what had been won.

For our purpose, there are these important additions:  it took the acquiescence of most of labor’s leadership to Taft-Hartley’s non-Communist affidavit (union officials had to affirm they weren’t and hadn’t been members of the Communist Party), the undoing of internal democracy in many unions by their leaders, and the complicity of the membership of the CIO unions to finally break the unions’ power.

Of course cooptation, repression and divide and conquer played major roles in the defeat of labor as a force for real democracy. But complicity played a central role.  John L Lewis warned what would happen if Taft-Hartley’s non-Communist affidavit wasn’t ignored, and called upon the unions to engage in massive non-cooperation.

The unions that later merged into the AFL-CIO were already tamed.  The march through the institutions was halted.  The war of position was reversed.  Unions as participatory small “d” democratic institutions that voiced the common good as well as the particular interests of workers they represented became advocacy organizations in which members paid dues and expected benefits.

**The Role of Civil Society**

In my judgment, as in Linthicum’s, turning away from the struggle is an abdication of responsibility, complicity in evil.  Here I want to turn to the question, “Who should engage in the struggle beyond those already engaged?”

Citizens and others in the United States are organized in associations that play a greater or lesser role in public life.  The aggregate of these associations is “civil society”.  A vibrant civil society is the necessary underpinning of a democratic society. Without it, power tends to concentrate in fewer hands, a tendency manifest today as civil society has weakened and civic isolation has become more prevalent.  As Lord John Dalberg-Acton warned, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority; still more when you add the tendency of the certainty of corruption by authority.”

To take one example of a current application of Ezekiel’s call upon the people to bring Israel back to its original vision of a shalom society, let’s look at who might have, but didn’t, spoken out during the opioid crisis:

Why didn’t the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) or any other union whose members, members’ families, and members’ communities that are affected by the opioid crisis speak up?  UMWA’s website asks the question, “Why Union?” Its response says, in part:

When workers form a union, they come together and provide themselves with the opportunity to gain a voice in their workplace. Through a [collective bargaining agreement](http://umwa.org/for-members/collective-bargaining/) or contract, workers are able to improve their jobs and their lives.

Since opioids are not covered in the union collective bargaining agreement, should we assume that “improving…their lives” only applies at the workplace?  If you get killed in the community by a ruthless corporation seeking to maximize its profits, is that something to which the union says, “It’s none of our business?”  I hope not.

Why didn’t the American Federation of Government Employees, or whichever union represents Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) employees say anything?  The Preamble to AFGE’s Constitution says:

For the purpose of promoting unity of action in all matters affecting the mutual interests of government civilian employees in general, all other persons providing their personal service indirectly to the United States Government and for the improvement of government service, we as members of the American Federation of Government Employees, adopt this Constitution and Rules.

Should we assume that DEA’s sell out to industry was an “improvement of government service”? I doubt that’s what AFGE thinks. But we will never know unless they speak up.

Why didn’t any professional association that is supposed to be the bearer of the values its members claim to profess speak up?  Here, for example, is what the New York Bar Association says about the responsibilities of a lawyer:

New York Lawyer’s Code of Professional Responsibility

PREAMBLE

The continued existence of a free and democratic society depends upon recognition of the concept that justice is based upon the rule of law grounded in respect for the dignity of the individual and the capacity of the individual through reason for enlightened self-government. Law so grounded makes justice possible, for only through such law does the dignity of the individual attain respect and protection. Without it, individual rights become subject to unrestrained power, respect for law is destroyed, and rational self-government is impossible.

Lawyers, as guardians of the law, play a vital role in the preservation of society. The fulfillment of this role requiresan understanding by lawyers of their relationship with and function in our legal system. A consequent obligation of lawyers is to maintain the highest standards of ethical conduct.

In fulfilling professional responsibilities, a lawyer necessarily assumes various roles that require the performance of many difficult tasks. Not every situation which the lawyer may encounter can be foreseen, but fundamental ethical principles are always present for guidance. Within the framework of these principles, a lawyer must with courage and foresight be able and ready to shape the body of the law to the ever-changing relationships of society.

Here’s what the American Pharmacists Association says on the ethics of the profession:

Code of Ethics

PREAMBLE

Pharmacists are health professionals who assist individuals in making the best use of medications. This Code, prepared and supported by pharmacists, is intended to state publicly the principles that form the fundamental basis of the roles and responsibilities of pharmacists. These principles, based on moral obligations and virtues, are established to guide pharmacists in relationships with patients, health professionals, and society.

1) A pharmacist respects the covenantal relationship between the patient and pharmacist.

Considering the patient-pharmacist relationship as a covenant means that a pharmacist has moral obligations in response to the gift of trust received from society. In returnfor this gift, a pharmacist promises to help individuals achieve optimum benefit from their medications, to be committed to their welfare, and to maintain their trust.

I could go on through the list of purpose or vision statements, preambles to constitutions and other core documents for almost every union or professional association that exists in the United States and find similar values.

Certainly I would find similar statements for every religious denominational body or local church whose members and communities are affected by opioid addiction.

**WHO’S LEFT?**

Returning to Linthicum:

[T]he question must now be asked, “What are the people to do about it?” As a reformist force in society, what are we called to do? Obviously, the Bible doesn’t talk about community organizing, labor unions or democratic participation in civic life. These are social inventions of more recent times.

But its core message and narratives tell stories of people gathering themselves together out of their relationships with each other in order to fight for justice. Thus it was that Moses organized Pharaoh’s bricklayers to fight against their exploitation – with God on their side! Biblical leaders like Joshua, David, Jeremiah, Esther, Daniel, Peter, Mary Magdalene, John the Baptist and even the Pharaoh-defying midwives Shiphrah and Puah (Exod. 1:15-20) used tactics of confrontation, nonviolent civil disobedience, agitation, negotiation and holding systems accountable to bring about change. Nehemiah organized the people of Jerusalem to rebuild their city, successfully confronting the unjust systems of their country, and rebuilding their public life in the image of Deuteronomy.

…

Whether we are Christians, Jews, other peoples of faith, or those who love democracy and justice, the biblical witness can help us articulate a vision of public life lived at its highest, an analysis which enables us to understand evil as public and systemic as well as private and individual, and the commitment to work together in our public life toward a society which is truly relational and just, seeking a shared stewardship of the earth’s resources “so that there will be no poor among you.” (Deut. 15:4) This is the vision that will enable us to turn our society’s public life “upside-down”!

**WHERE ARE REV. LINTHICUM’S “WE”?**

Until recently, unions were marginal to any hope we might have for them playing the role Linthicum calls for.   Recent teacher strikes announce a different possibility:  the unions listened to student, parent and community voices beforethey went into negotiations.  They included in their proposed contracts items of particular interest to the presumed beneficiaries of their work. They built solidarity between the organization of the workplace and the organizations of the community. In many of them, a rank-and-file movement pushed cautious leaders to act when their initial instinct was to give in, and to refuse to accept a settlement that granted better wages and benefits but left out community-related concerns.

The opportunities to find parallels are endless:  airline industry unions could have quality and safety of service committees that seek information from passengers on quality of service.  The unions and professional associations that build the planes (International Association of Machinists (IAM), engineer professional associations and others) could have whistle-blowing structures that protect the anonymity of individuals while letting the public know that something is awry. They could even struggle with their employers to place these concerns (now “management prerogatives”) on the contract negotiating table.

Every public employee union could expand its agenda to include the presumed beneficiaries of the services of its members.  The quality, appropriateness, efficiency and effectiveness of what workers do could be determined in alliance with the civil society associations of those who benefit from them.

**LESSONS**

The opioid story is not qualitatively different from any story in which big business buys government to do its bidding.  It tells the story more clearly because of the incredible success the pharmaceutical industry had in buying or distracting politicians, whether left, right or center.

More important, however, from my point of view is what this story tells us about what needs to be done at the base of society.  The politicians, we can generally assume, make a calculation between organized money and organized people. When there are organized people, their people power organizations are vehicles to reach voters.  Organized people can be or become citizens who discuss, debate, deliberate, discern, negotiate, compromise and otherwise engage in the conversations that are the hallmark of any meaningful idea of citizenship. They can hold politicians accountable.  Their members, members’ families and neighbors, and others can provide the small donations and door-to-door workers who can win elections without big money.

In the absence of organized people, with the potential of becoming citizens who arrive at conclusions on candidates and issues, campaigns  must be waged to mobilize voters, who are in this case a market (citizens become consumers) to whom products (candidates and issues) must be sold through mass media.  That requires money to buy media time, which, the 60 Minutes/Washington Post story abundantly revealed, comes from the pharmaceutical industry, but in any other case we might look at comes from a particular sector of the economy with a profit or other stake in the outcome (banks, manufacturers, distributors, retailers, etc).

To accomplish what I propose requires the renewal of our voluntary associations, their transformation from third parties to which we pay dues and from which we expect representation (or salvation) to participatory bodies in which the skills, attitudes and values of democratic citizenship are learned.

Organize!