

False Idols

How Diversion is Destroying Democracy

Kurt Warner

Critical Perspectives on Social Science



VERNON PRESS

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www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200
Wilmington, Delaware, 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Critical Perspectives on Social Science

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024946681

ISBN: 979-8-8819-0084-7

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To Tanya Warner and in memory of Elissa Warner, with love

Foreword

Dr. Bryan Flynn

Binghamton University

Nearly 20 years ago, I began my career in higher education. In that time, I have had the pleasure of teaching, advising and admitting hundreds of students in a role I often considered to be a gatekeeper to the profession of social work. Ultimately, my commitment was and continues to be to the thousands of clients my students would end up serving throughout their careers. Being in a position to help guide students through their journey of becoming compassionate and effective practitioners and one that comes with a great deal of responsibility and joy.

The joy comes from working with and getting to know students like the author of this book. Kurt is the kind of student instructors love to have in class and the kind of student graduate directors love to have as a representative of their program. Not only is he academically gifted, but he is also kind and empathetic. Kurt will be a lifelong learner and he was one of our finest students and he is now a colleague and friend. When you read his book, you will undoubtedly agree that he is highly committed to the well-being of the clients he serves and to issues of social justice and individual and societal ethical integrity.

My experiences as a clinician have taken me to Ground Zero following the terrorist attacks on 9/11, providing end-of-life care to patients in an HIV clinic and to a trauma center emergency room meeting the non-medical needs of patients and their families. Throughout my career, I have worked with people facing traumatic loss, chronic illness, psychiatric emergencies and addiction. Today, I work with first responders and veterans who are working to unpack years of accumulated trauma.

This book is about distraction and how distraction often takes us off the path of what is important. As a social worker, I often help my clients identify the distractions in their lives so that they can prioritize and focus on what is truly important to them. There are the external distractions in our lives, many of which Kurt covers here so eloquently, but also there are the internal distractions and these are often the emotions and feelings that set us off on paths we were not planning or hoping to go down. Anger, fear and sadness, when left unchecked, permeate our relationships, our communication patterns, our motivation, our hopes and aspirations, and of course, our physical well-being. The “big 3”, as I like to think of them, are the main rivers of emotion (along with

love and joy but typically people do not seek out the help of a therapist when they are feeling happy or are in love). The big 3 can leave us feeling lost, isolated, confused and hopeless. The feelings that often (hopefully) lead someone to seek out help. Anger, fear, and sadness are rivers that contain our depression about the past and our anxiety about the future. Out of those rivers, flow tributaries that lead to feelings like frustration, envy, regret, resentment and worry. These things distract us. They cause alienation in our relationships. They cost us jobs and other opportunities by playing on our insecurities and other cognitive distortions. They make us retreat from the world and they distract us from working through what is often at the root of our pain, which is usually grief. Grief is not just about the loss of a loved one. We also grieve the loss of control, identity, belonging, community, purpose, safety, desire and goals. But most of us do not talk openly about that grief. Many of us are taught – particularly men – both implicitly and explicitly that anger, which is the gatekeeper to grief, is acceptable to demonstrate and express openly. But not grief. Grief many of us are not sure what to do with. We avoid talking openly about it. When we see people we love grieving, we try to distract and hope that it goes away quickly and on its own. Anger and fear are at the very accessible surface of our emotional selves. Grief is at the base and most significant level of our pain. And when we are not allowed to process it, to talk openly about it, we are distracted from working through it. Grief is a difficult enough road to travel down but when it is complicated by the distractions in our lives, it impedes our ability to find acceptance, empathy, gratitude and forgiveness.

As evidenced, anger, fear, sadness, and the many emotional tributaries that flow from them can be personally destructive and serve as distractions to the individual, deterring us from confronting grief, the root of our pain, and distracting us from pursuing a better life. In a similar way, Kurt illustrates how the external distractions from the larger systems of society can be collectively destructive and take us off course from confronting our civic duty and engaging in the greater good. It is only through the recognition of these external distractions that we can stop being led astray from them and instead engage in and enhance our democracy. In this book, Kurt helps us identify the distractions that deter us from contributing to the betterment of the collective whole. He paves the way for us. He provides here what we need to do to set our compass in the direction and path in which we want to travel. It is up to us not to get distracted.

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Short Statement on the History of the Development of the Book

This book grew out of a need for it. Roman history intersects with modern history in many places. Juvenal's writings are a great point of intersection to begin examination. No parts of this book draw from previously published material by the author. The book was written out of a zeal for writing and a passion for doing everything in my power to attempt to call attention to a problem and present solutions to that problem in order to redeem and ameliorate society, which is a vital role literature has played throughout human history. In doing so, the book's development was aimed at improving my relationship with my fellow human being and, more importantly, at improving my fellow human being's relationship with each other.

Kurt Warner

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