

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**DAVID BOSWORTH** is a professor in the University of Washington's Creative Writing Program and the author of *The Demise of Virtue in Virtual America: The Moral Origins of the Great Recession*. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** and graduate research assistant **Yael Levin Hungerford** before his presentation at the Boisi Center.

**OWENS:** In *The Demise of Virtue in Virtual America*, you argue that the American national character has been transformed in recent decades. Can you describe the nature of that transformation?

**BOSWORTH:** Early on in this project, I found a quote by Descartes in his *Discourse on Method* that seemed very applicable to our post–World War II period. He made the observation, while trying to understand his own turbulent era, that sometimes what people think they believe is different from what they actually believe—that is, from the values encoded in their everyday actions. This discrepancy is not the same thing as simple hypocrisy, which is common in every era, or as the Judeo-Christian conception of sin. Instead, it occurs in individuals subconsciously when traditional values are shifting inside their social environment without overt acknowledgement—in our case, through the agency of technological and economic progress, which are presumed to be unproblematically good.

Another key quote, this one from Marshall McLuhan, clarified for me how such a process of subconscious moral change can occur. “Everyone,” he wrote, “experiences more than he understands. Yet it’s experience, rather than understanding, that influences behavior.” You don’t have to overtly preach a new morality

when you have been licensed to design the architecture and define the routine schedules of everyday life. By recalibrating the patterns of ordinary experience, you can change a people’s ethical behavior without their conscious knowledge or political consent. *The Demise of Virtue in*



*Virtual America* argues that a transformation of the American character has been occurring through just such an agency of tacit yet pervasive influence.

**OWENS:** Tell us about the content of that change.

**BOSWORTH:** Our nation may have the same geographical coordinates that it had in 1946, but we are living in a very different place, one all humanly built and

composed, our entire day spent within an allied set of physical and digital architectures. The American story is essentially an *inside* story now, and the content of the ethical change underway has been directly related to the narrow agendas of those institutions that have been licensed to construct and manage the inner spaces of this new “virtual America.” There, nearly every activity has been rationalized or monetized, converted into a product or service for sale.

Two examples will suffice for now. Think of the transformation of middle-class childcare over the last fifty years: the difference between playing in the street or a nearby field where you are creating your own games and, instead, having every hour and activity organized for you—play dates, official leagues, endless lessons, expensive equipment and tutorial sessions.

Even more revealing of the ongoing moral transformation inside “virtual America” has been the conversion of the open marketplace into the enclosed mall, so that what once was a diverse social space with civic, recreational and commercial activities all available, has become instead a micromanaged sphere where all possibilities for activity have been reduced to commercial ones. The meaning of this conversion is deliberately concealed, which is one reason why I use the term

“virtual” to describe it. Physically, the enclosed mall’s interior spaces deliberately mimic the appearance of a public park or a civic square—there are often benches and fountains and planters, for example. But it isn’t, in fact, a civic space, nor does it honor the political values we expect in one. We’re being observed all the time by security guards. All our financial transactions are being tracked. We may be filmed by paid consultants who are studying how products should be displayed to boost sales. In most states, we are not even guaranteed free speech. We can’t campaign or picket or even wear a t-shirt that bears a political statement.

**OWENS:** What is the value system manifested in this transformation? You nicely described the experiential shift and the rise of pseudo-civic space, but what are the attendant value shifts that have come as a result?

**BOSWORTH:** In “virtual America,” nearly all activities are being torqued to serve “the bottom line,” whether corporate or personal. All values are assessed by the measures of money. But in practice, there are two separate commercial environments to consider—marketing and management, our behavior at play and our behavior at work—and those domains enforce distinctly different codes of conduct: the first narrowly focused on boosting consumption and the second on enhancing productivity.

In the privatized space of the enclosed mall—where there are no clocks, no windows, and there are gorgeous product displays in every direction—the emphasis is on salesmanship. Everything is carefully directed toward boosting desire to induce consumption. And given the economic model that we have selected for our mass communications systems, the same can be said for those virtual spaces conveyed to us by our electronic and digital media: they are also being “brought to us by” and so also “for” the ethos of consumption.

At work, however, the ethical emphasis, though equally reductive, is nearly the opposite: we are not encouraged to indulge ourselves but to submit to the rationalized schemes of industrial production—to model our behavior after a machine. That such an economic agenda can dehumanize its employees, even as it succeeds in mass-producing the material goods that we believe we need, is a critique long recognized. Recall Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*.

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**“The rationalization of the workspace and consumerism of public spaces are deeply incoherent.... We’re expected to slave like Sisyphus and consume like Falstaff.”**

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**OWENS:** Presumably that also has transferred itself to democratic practices?

**BOSWORTH:** In at least three ways. First, the gross infusion of corporate money has clearly corrupted both the conduct of elections and the legislative process. Second, elections themselves are now conducted like a consumer business, with an over-emphasis on marketing (as in the thirty-second attack ad) and a new dependence on hiring political pros—profit-driven electoral technicians. Finally, indoctrinated at work and at play, the public itself has increasingly adopted the same ethos.

Let me give one example that illuminates how that last change has been taking place. In the early postwar period, many women were not in the corporate workforce, and so, although powerfully influenced by consumer advertising via TV and radio, they were not as indoctrinated into the values esteemed in the rationalized workplace. Now, nearly every working adult is commercially employed, and so is acclimatized to the reductive ethos of efficient production. Parents making play dates for their kids exemplifies how we now organize our home lives after the patterns of behavior idealized at the office. That’s not always a bad thing, but it is a sign of how our values are being tacitly influenced by this overweening economy.

**OWENS:** Do you see this relating to the privatization of traditionally governmental functions as well?

**BOSWORTH:** Absolutely. That’s not to say there aren’t credible critiques of governmental action—the inefficiencies of its bureaucracies and the arrogance of its administrators—but, for me, the problem with those critiques is that they tend to imagine that governmental administration will be replaced by either civic associations or small and local businesses, and that’s almost never the case today. Instead, enormous national and multinational corporations have been co-opting the authority of democratic government, even as they reject the social responsibilities that normally attend it. Even in the seemingly endless wars that we’ve been fighting, we have been relying more on private contractors (once known as profiteers) than on actual members of our military services.

The danger here is personal as well as political. These two aggressively enforced codes of conduct—the radical rationalization of the workplace and the over-commercialization of our civic spaces and public airwaves—are deeply incoherent as a moral template for everyday life. Under the regime of “virtual America,”

where all economic progress is presumed to be unproblematically good, we're expected to slave like Sisyphus and consume like Falstaff. That's not a peaceful or plausible route to achieve the good life.

**OWENS:** One of the strong themes throughout the book also seems to be a faith in science of a certain sort, especially economics. Can you expound on that a bit?

**BOSWORTH:** There have been two main versions of modernity in political governance, and each has imagined itself to be "scientific" in character, borrowing the authority of the physical sciences and insisting that it can be applied to the social realm. In my view, that assumption is a very dangerous one, inviting the arrogance of utopian certainty into human affairs where, instead, a disciplined humility ought to reign. The catastrophic failure of communism (aka "scientific socialism") is a cautionary tale that we in the West, America especially, completely misread. The radical capitalism we boosted in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse (which might be aptly called "scientific capitalism") is also delusional and, as the market meltdown of 2008 clearly demonstrated, inherently unstable.

As a society, we are very adept at the practical sciences, and modern capitalism does accelerate certain kinds of technological advances. But beyond the injustices that plague a system that corrupts our democracy with corporate moneys and generates egregious economic inequalities, our current political economy also depends on a highly disingenuous view of "progress." The acquisition of material products alone cannot make a good life and certain narrowly applied technological advances can prove to be socially destabilizing.

Our high-tech entrepreneurs are fond of touting the "disruptive" effects of their new products. But the unsettling truth is that a healthy society can only successfully accept so much disruption. One of the aphorisms I've adopted for myself



is the following cautionary one: "rapid technological progress tends to trigger social regress." Societies are organic and depend on a complex set of interrelated checks and balances between factions and interests. When introduced, a radically empowering new technology will undo that system of checks and balances. Each time there is a significant technological revolution, it takes decades or longer for society as a whole to recover its moral equilibrium by domesticating the new powers that have been unleashed by our species' innate inventiveness.

**OWENS:** Would you see climate change as an example of this? Amidst the vast supporting data there is a pretty widespread rejection of the science of climate research.

**BOSWORTH:** Climate change is a perfect example of how, under scientific capitalism, the broader and longer dangers of material progress routinely go unaccounted for. A telling instance would be the old aerosol cans, which were frequently used for deodorant sprays—a consumer product whose need was almost entirely manufactured by corporate advertising in the postwar period. As it turned out, the chlorofluorocarbons that fueled those sprays were depleting the ozone layer in the atmosphere, resulting in a dangerous health situation for everybody. Those

chemicals are now strictly controlled and the ozone layer has begun to improve. But such a product supplies a darkly comic example of how a small, narrowly focused "improvement" (and a very dubious one at that) can have unforeseen disastrous consequences.

**OWENS:** What's interesting to me in light of the faith in science that you're describing is this resurgent rejection of science and what we might call a faith in faith—for example, a resurgence of religious folks in America who are discounting science now in certain areas, but not others.

**BOSWORTH:** Well, as Hamlet complained, "reason panders will," and so people will turn to various rationales, scientific or religious, to endorse their own desires or dearly held opinions. Still, I find the surge in fundamentalism in all three of the Abrahamic religions over the last forty years a revealing, if also deeply troubling phenomenon. Modernity, whose primary authority has been scientific reasoning, has been a uniquely secular movement in human history. But cultures need religion, which is why many pastimes in modernizing America that are nominally secular nevertheless assume something of the role of a religion in our lives, even hobbies demanding the commitment of "the converted."

They aren't very successful at that role, however. If you don't have something important to say or do at the grave of your parents—and true scientific reasoning doesn't pretend to offer any such guidance—you're not serving a key function of the religious life. The surge in fundamentalism, in America especially, has been a clear expression that economic and technological progress are not sufficient in themselves for a satisfying life. The terrible irony is that, in their flight from the scientific worldview, fundamentalists have adopted the intolerant temper of scientism, clinging to the notion that they have fixed and final answers to every crucial question. In this they most resemble their old enemies, the communists.

**OWENS:** That characterization of how Americans will do anything religiously, in a sense, is a nice segue to your conversation on evangelical mammonism. Could you expand on that?

**BOSWORTH:** “Evangelical mammonism” is a term I use to both describe and satirize the spirit of radical capitalism in our era. Our political economy is “evangelical” in the sense that it has assumed the role of religion by constantly preaching the “good news” of this or that final solution to the human predicament. And it is clearly a form of “mammonism,” because its solution is always narrowly rooted in material improvements, whether the safer car or the faster computer.

We're a culture with two separate but interrelated traditions of virtue: the republican and the Judeo-Christian. The latter has long offered a warning against an over-investment in material goods—a condition personified in the character of mammon. We need to draw on that deep cultural memory. Mammonism does not mark the way to a better life, much less the earthly paradise the ad-man promises. Indeed, as the market meltdown of 2008 showed, it is more likely to lead to a hellish one.

**HUNGERFORD:** Do you see any current trends that offer hope that we might be moving in a different direction?

**BOSWORTH:** There are creative responses out there, though whether they can gain any traction soon remains an open question. There is the commons movement, which tries to imagine a locally based economic system that has been freed of both top-down governmental regulation and the dominion of large corporations—an economy run by stakeholders and not

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**“I think cultures need religion, so all things in America that aren't religious tend to become religious, even if they don't acknowledge it.”**

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bureaucrats or shareholders. There's also the B-corporation phenomenon: commercial startups freely choosing to include in their corporate charters the obligation to serve a few specified social goods as well as to seek profits. And the Clinton Foundation has pursued some interesting projects, trying to convince multinational corporations that there are public goods that can be also prove to be profitable ventures.

In the past, philanthropy has been the fig leaf that has covered for the multiple sins of the corporate sector. That, clearly, is no longer sufficient. We need a dramatic reformation of these large economic

institutions that now dominate and corrupt our democracy. At the beginning of modernity, in the early 17th century, the challenge was to somehow morally domesticate the new but still crude individualism; today, in the early post-modern period, the challenge is to find a way to civilize (moralize) the large corporation.

**HUNGERFORD:** What is your goal in writing this book and bringing our attention to these issues?

**BOSWORTH:** There can be no reform without recognition. The values of “Evangelical mammonism” so permeate our everyday lives that, like Descartes's contemporaries, we have ceased to recognize what we actually believe, and how those actual beliefs do, in fact, defy the best of our republican and Judeo-Christian conceptions of virtue. The book aims to clarify both the breadth and the depth of the changes underway, and, by linking them to the market meltdown and Great Recession, reveal how dangerous these changes are economically as well as ethically.

**OWENS:** Your use of Melville as a literary prophet is intriguing. Could you finish by saying just a bit about why and how Melville is relevant for our contemporary age?

**BOSWORTH:** There's a great quote by Simone Weil that can be applied, I believe, to any troubled era: “If we know in what way society is unbalanced, we must do what we can to lend weight to the lighter scale.” Responding to a growing imbalance they perceived in a rapidly modernizing American society, Hawthorne and Melville—and Melville was very much influenced by Hawthorne—were “lending weight” to the darker side of the human condition, reemphasizing the natural limits placed on hope and happiness. There are just some things that “can-do” can't do . . . ever. What Melville clearly foresaw in his work of the 1850s—after which he quit writing fiction at the peak of his powers at the age of 37—was the

degree to which the American character's investment in an optimistic view of life was being distorted and corrupted.

If you want to grasp the inherently dehumanizing impact of the strictly rationalized workplace, read "Bartleby the Scrivener," first published in 1853. If you want to understand the multiple ways that hope can be corrupted to "close the sale" on a whole range of dubious products, spend a week exploring *The Confidence Man*. And if you want to confront the potential consequences of adopting a political economy that imagines that it can conquer nature, reread the calamitous ending of Melville's *Moby Dick*. Like all real prophets, his is the news that has stayed news. We ignore it today at our own peril.

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