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### March 29, 2013: The New Face of Nihilism

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Title: The New Face of Nihilism

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3/29/2013 – – David Brooks wrote an op-ed in the New York Times today entitled The Empirical Kids. He was describing the current generation of elite college students through the lens of a paper written by a student at Yale, where he is teaching. The current generation of college students differ from those who grew up in the 1990s whom Brooks had described back in 2001. That earlier group was smart, hard-working and cautious. Unlike them, however, current students did not grow up in the prosperity of the 1990s nor in the enthusiasm over the fall of the Soviet system. The current generation of college students grew up in the shadow of 9/11. They were seven or eight in 2001. They grew up with the moralistic rhetoric of President George W. Bush that led only to interminable conflict and, says Brooks, national humiliation. Because of these experiences, the current generation distrusts moral claims. Instead, it is suggested, these students look for small gains that can be empirically verified, which generally they cannot be. These students also experienced the financial crisis and came to view the capitalist system as brutal and unpredictable. They have also absorbed a feeling of national decline in which they lack confidence that they can compete in the global economy. The most revealing quote in the piece is this one: “We are deeply resistant to idealism.” The promise of social movements does not seem to this group of students likely to be filled. Occupy Wall Street led to nothing. The Arab Spring seems mired in internecine conflict. Brooks and this student writer apparently call this generation empirical. But that term does not seem to me at all to capture the spirit that Brooks describes. Rather this seems to me to be the new face of nihilism. This group of students does not really believe in anything and has no reason to. Things are a lot worse than I thought if this is the spirit of undergraduates at Yale.