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3. The Shaking of the Foundations

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3. The Shaking of the Foundations

Abstract

The internal reactions of our ideas and feelings, while less obvious, are of even greater significance than the changes which have occurred in our institutions. So great have these internal changes been that one writer has described them as the shaking of the foundations. This characterization reminds us of what has been of major importance to Western man: his ideas and ideals. Throughout his history it has been these ideas which have supplied both his standards and his motivations, whether they referred to something beyond nature as Augustine's City of God, something beyond the present as More's Utopia, something within nature as Stoic law, or something like Bentham's greatest happiness principle. It has been this search for an ideal and the desire to bring it into being which have accounted for Western man's restlessness, his dissatisfaction with the present, and his desire for something better. When we remember the role that such ideas have played in Western Civilization, we have a better appreciation of what their upsetting entails for man today. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Meaning, Ideas, Truism, Individualist, Idealized

Disciplines

Intellectual History

Comments

This is a part of [Section XIX: An Analysis of the Contemporary World's Search for Meaning](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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3. The Shaking of the Foundations

The internal reactions of our ideas and feelings, while less obvious, are of even greater significance than the changes which have occurred in our institutions. So great have these internal changes been that one writer has described them as the shaking of the foundations. This characterization reminds us of what has been of major importance to Western man: his ideas and ideals. Throughout his history it has been these ideas which have supplied both his standards and his motivations, whether they referred to something beyond nature as Augustine's City of God, something beyond the present as More's Utopia, something within nature as Stoic law, or something like Bentham's greatest happiness principle. It has been this search for an ideal and the desire to bring it into being which have accounted for Western man's restlessness, his dissatisfaction with the present, and his desire for something better. When we remember the role that such ideas have played in Western Civilization, we have a better appreciation of what their upsetting entails for man today.

The first and most important thing to note about this change is that the ideas which Western man inherited from the past have been bent to his own will. In overthrowing the absolutist institutions of church and state he also overthrew the absolutist ideas upon which these institutions claimed to be founded. The only conclusion that he would accept was that ideas were relative to his own will, and dependent on it rather than on anything else. Ideas were means for getting something done, and all argument for their independent existence was referred to as rationalization. By means of this argument the results of reason were no longer interpreted as ideas but as ideologies.

This approach had serious results with regard to the status and meaning of ideas. These results can be seen when we look carefully at the ordinary vocabulary of our contemporary world, in which we can see the changes in the older words and the appearance of new ones. In place of rational we are apt to use rationalized or justified. In lieu of individual we might say individualist. For ideal we substitute idealized. Rather than true we use truism;

Sermon
 rather than real we say realized. Idea has become idea(l)ism. Philosophy has become philosophy for life, and the peace of God has become peace of mind. Personal has become personalistic or personalized. The meaning of "character" has changed from referring to strength to referring to idiosyncrasy. And in place of ideals we are surrounded by isms held by card-carrying ists, rather than by individuals. Clearly, if our ordinary language be any indication, the culture in which we find ourselves today has undergone a tremendous change.

While the ideas of both institutions and individuals tend to have the status of ideologies today, there is yet a significant difference between them from the point of view of the individual. It is largely based on the difference in size and power between the individual and the institutions with which he is confronted. These institutions have a status which, in historical terms, is much more permanent than his. This difference plus the difference in size and power enables the institutions to give their ideas a permanence he cannot give his own ideas. When these institutions create a coherent system of such ideas we call the result a myth. And this myth, backed by the techniques and power of the institution, takes on what looks to the individual like a life of its own. While this is only partially true of the smaller institutions, it is supremely true of the political institutions: "There will always be an England."

In the past, Western man's ideas, whether the universals of Aristotle or the laws of the Stoics, were interpretations of his relations to nature and society. In the interests of the individual, the Enlightenment pulled these ideas from their dominant position. But the result of this has been to emasculate the very things which had served as buffers between individual and individual, between individual and institution, and between institution and institution. Since all ideas are now nothing but ideologies which are the expressions of individuals or institutions, there is no protection to the individual such as they once offered or could have offered. This means that there is a direct power clash between individuals and institutions which can be seen only as a clash between two types of persons of greatly different size and power. It is this situation which, the psychologist tells us, accounts for the fact of tension today, a tension which is basically contention.

Whether the ideological myths are imposed from the top, as they are in some countries, or created by the people who voluntarily make them their own, as they are in other countries, is of supreme importance when we are thinking solely in political terms. This difference enables us to discriminate between what we call totalitarian and democratic countries. It is both the strength and the appeal (so necessary with regard to the uncommitted countries today) of the democratic countries that their citizens may freely accept, criticize, or perhaps change the policies of their governments. Herein, as Mill and many others have insisted, is to be found the unique contribution of countries whose policies are so

constituted, and their improvement on preceding types of government. This very capacity for change has been a valued safeguard against revolution.

But Mill's ideas were expressed a century ago, when times and institutions were different. The world was then one of isolated nations living in almost complete independence of one another. This nineteenth century situation also assumed the willingness of peoples to change many of their ideas. And it assumed a situation in which certain moral limitations on speaking and acting by individuals and states were accepted by almost everyone. Today the democratic states are faced with others which are rigidly dogmatic, and which refuse to accept the limitations of nineteenth century morals. And here again we are up against a basic contemporary problem radically stated: How does one deal with people and institutions for whom there are no limits, no rules, and for whom nothing serves as a check? Their ideas and ideals mean what they say and are valid only as long as they suit the convenience of the moment; and they can be changed at any time and for any reason.

No matter how important the political dimension of this problem is, the psychological dimension is of at least equal importance. In both the position of the individual is very similar. His problem is that of trying to find some firm ground on which to stand when confronted by these institutions and their myths. If ideas are but ideologies, then they are but the creations of their respective political institutions, and nothing more. There may be no question of what Western man prefers, if he has a free choice; but this is not the question at issue. The question here is: What basis can he have for his choice? What reason can he give? What value can he use as the standard for his choice? Having accepted the idea that all ideas and ideals are relative to the purposes of individuals and institutions, contemporary man is left in an unstable position, in a power situation, with no basis on which to ground the commitments which he is continually called upon to make.

It is small wonder that thinking is pushed to absurd limits. This is what George Orwell (1903-1950) had in mind when, in his *Animal Farm*, he described one of the principles of the new society which the pigs were setting up as "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." If the word "equal" has no referent or basis, then it is possible for the pigs, in this case, to make it mean anything they wish for their purposes.

This situation which Orwell depicts is, in one respect, nothing new for Western man. He has been making comparative judgments ever since his civilization began. What is new, and radically different, however, is the status of the standards in terms of which these judgments are to be made. Perhaps not since the fall of the Roman Empire has the slate been wiped quite so clean of old established values in such a short time. Western standards have always had more than individual, social, historical, or cultural status. They

have had metaphysical or religious status, and their particular historical manifestations have been judged as approximations of these absolute standards. Revelation and reason have been the means of knowing these higher ideals. But now neither of these methods is generally accepted, at least in its earlier form. So Western man appears to be in a situation where he has not only lost his old bearings, but also the means of achieving new ones. Thus his idealism, which up to now had been positive and creative, has become negative and critical. This reaction can be seen in the Beat Generation in the United States, the Angry Young Men in England, and, on a more penetrating level, among the current existentialists.