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XIX. An Analysis of the Contemporary World's Search for Meaning

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XIX. An Analysis of the Contemporary World's Search for Meaning

Abstract

Any analysis of the contemporary world which is to be valid must begin with the individual's own local situation and immediate problems. How far it ranges in space and time beyond this depends on the capacity, imagination, and intellectual staying power of those who begin such a quest. Because this book is written for students in the United States it will take this country as the platform from which to launch its analysis. This is not to imply that the European emphasis which has characterized our work thus far is now irrelevant. It is rather to face the fact that Americans are today in a position where they cannot avoid providing their own interpretation of the present state of Western Civilization. [*excerpt*]

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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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XIX. AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

Any analysis of the contemporary world which is to be valid must begin with the individual's own local situation and immediate problems. How far it ranges in space and time beyond this depends on the capacity, imagination, and intellectual staying power of those who begin such a quest. Because this book is written for students in the United States it will take this country as the platform from which to launch its analysis. This is not to imply that the European emphasis which has characterized our work thus far is now irrelevant. It is rather to face the fact that Americans are today in a position where they cannot avoid providing their own interpretation of the present state of Western Civilization.

We are fortunate in that for such an attempt we are in the possession of a great and constantly increasing number of books and articles which are directly concerned with this problem. During the past few years many thinkers, from many different points of view, have addressed themselves to it. Psychologists, anthropologists, theologians, and philosophers, as well as novelists, dramatists, poets, and critics, have all felt keenly the current demand for an analysis of the human predicament, for some relevant form of "meaning."

The effect on Western Civilization of the events which we have been describing in the last few chapters has been such that our own century has been called a time of crisis or an age of anxiety. Indeed, it is this latter phrase which serves as the title of one of our most significant poems and of one of our most recent symphonies. Putting aside for the moment whether or not our age is unusually crisis-ridden, it is significant that so many thoughtful people believe that it is.

There are two levels on which we can discuss such an age. We can, on the one hand, attempt to describe its events and the changes on our ways of thinking and acting which they have effected. We can, on the other hand, attempt to evaluate the meaning of these changes, and analyze their significance as they have affected our interpretation of our ideas and institutions. The former of these levels has been treated in previous chapters. It is the task of this chapter to address us to the latter discussion: What is the meaning of the events through which Western Civilization is passing?

Meaning-goal, common reference point. we have no reference point. During past times, there were reference points. Something that no one questioned, previous periods - M.A. - Church, - Enlightenment - that of change. - Ex. - existence of the good. we have lost our "bench marks" since we are in the midst of a period of transition to a new idea.

We may begin with the observation that many of our basic beliefs have been seriously shaken. Each civilization may be judged in terms of the extent to which it achieves its ideas and ideals. The Greeks believed in the Good as a real ideal which served as the basis and limit of their thought and action. The Jews believed in God and His will as the supreme value toward which their efforts were directed, and from which their meaning was derived. The Romans developed the concept of natural law which served as the foundation for their definition of what ought to be, and their standard by which to judge what is. Over the centuries the West built a culture with a specific set of values. These values, it was believed, had a certain status in reality, in the very nature of things. The Middle Ages wove earlier strands into its own synthesis, making God the source of value and meaning. The Enlightenment downgraded or even dispensed with the supernatural, and claimed to find in the laws of nature its ultimate point of reference. Yet each of these cultural syntheses had some common reference point as the ground for its values. And each judged its own institutions in terms of the aid they gave in attaining that point.

It will help us to understand the meaning of recent events if we recall that the major values of the Enlightenment passed into the twentieth century largely at the hands of nineteenth century liberals. Liberalism had an answer for questions raised in the whole spectrum of thought, a spectrum which can conveniently be divided into three major bands. The broad center band covered man's relations with nature, including institutions and society, all of which were believed to be governed by natural laws. Within this area Western man was seen as capable of improving his condition through the work of his own head and hands, in cooperation with nature. While some thinkers, such as Condorcet or Spencer, saw this cooperation in terms of inevitable or necessary progress, the great majority saw it mainly in terms of the possibility of progress. The role of institutions within this area was viewed in terms of their ability to aid man in this progress; they were means rather than ends. Within this broad context Western man labored mightily, raising the whole level of his civilization, and carrying it to the very ends of the globe.

Outside this middle band of liberal thought there lay two other areas, the individual band and the international. The individual band was viewed as a man's private concern, within which he was free to do anything he wished, as long as he did not injure another or infringe on another's rights to follow his own whims. This aspect of liberal thought was viewed as the area which preserved the integrity of the individual; and this integrity was seen as the very basis of Western Civilization and a check upon the growth of its institutions. As Western man entered upon the twentieth century his institutions increasingly crowded into this area of privacy. At the same time he began to leave the decision as to which of his actions infringed upon other persons to these very institutions, especially to the state. And he regarded

*load the question by shifting your definition??
Do we have any "bench marks" If you accept the absence of "bench marks" then this is a "bench mark." No common reference pt. is a common reference pt.*

this private area as one in which he was free to do as he pleased as long as he did not run afoul of the law, or get caught.

At the other end of the spectrum of liberal thought was the band of international relations. Since the Middle Ages the idea of a Christendom united under the aegis of an ecclesiastical institution has largely disappeared. And the seventeenth century's suggestion of an international law based on nature failed to order adequately the relations between sovereign states. The balance of power worked in this area effectively as a modus vivendi until the French Revolution, when it was upset by Napoleon. From the Council of Vienna until the outbreak of World War I (1815-1914) there was almost a century of comparative international peace, during which most of the energy of the Western states was drawn off by their own internal developments and external expansions, while a revived balance of power doctrine helped to keep the peace between them. But, two world wars in the twentieth century have brought many people to the conclusion that the heritage of the Enlightenment is not adequate for today's tasks. Nevertheless, until well into this century, what was taken to be the progress of Western Civilization seemed to serve as adequate justification of the whole spectrum of Enlightenment thought.

Long before World War I, there were ideas which questioned Enlightenment values. Some of these have already been dealt with at length, but from the vantage point of this chapter we may be better able to grasp their significance more clearly. Such men as Hegel, Darwin, Bismarck, and Nietzsche suggested, in various ways, that man was neither a rational nor a perfectible animal, but rather one who was led more by his will or emotions. In seeking to find justification for this belief (and Darwin here is a possible exception), they turned from nature to history, finding what they believed to be the more basic expressions of man in the state, race, class, or culture. And what they saw in history was primarily power and the struggle for power. Individuals were seen as expressions of these various aspects, rather than the other way around. Thus power, rather than value, became the justification for ideas and institutions. Might made right. The belief that there was an idea or law of nature, or of God, which could (and would) act as a limit to man's actions was seriously weakened. Ideas and ideals became ideologies or "isms", rationalizations and justifications of power rather than references to some objective reality or goal. Implicit, and sometimes explicit, in the thought of these men was the destruction of the very foundations upon which the Enlightenment was constructed.

During the nineteenth century these ideas made no great inroads upon Enlightenment beliefs and took on few major institutional forms. The relative peace and prosperity of this century were too strong to permit more than sporadic victories for these corrosive beliefs, and those which did occur were largely explained away as atavistic hangovers from the past which would soon be lost in future progress. As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, however, there were

~~added other factors which increased the element of power and thus aggravated man's problems. Any list of these factors must include the expansion of industrialization with its attendant specialization, the growth in size of our institutions, the emphasis on efficiency as of primary importance, and the increase in the speed of change in Western Civilization. To these internal factors must be added other cultures such as those of China and Russia (whether Russia is an integral part of Western Civilization remains a debatable question) which are now challenging ours with both military power and propaganda. Largely as a result of this complex of factors Western man's attitude has changed from one of optimism to one of anxiety.~~