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

Contemporary Civilization

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1. Some Major Factors of the Contemporary Social World: The American Example

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1. Some Major Factors of the Contemporary Social World: The American Example

Abstract
One of the major factors of the contemporary social world is industrialization. Recent industrial developments have moved in two major directions. First, there has been a tremendous increase in technological innovation, reaching the stage which we call automation. The machines which we have developed are doing their work only too well, including some tasks which we had long though could be done only by human hands and heads. Not only the blue-collar worker but also the white-collar worker seems to be faced with the possibility of technological unemployment. [excerpt]

Keywords
Contemporary Civilization, Technology, Innovation, Industrialization, Specialization, Efficiency

Disciplines
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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.

Authors

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1. Some Major Factors of the Contemporary Social World: the American Example

One of the major factors of the contemporary social world (remember that our focus is on the United States) is industrialization. Recent industrial developments have moved in two major directions. First, there has been a tremendous increase in technological innovation, reaching the stage which we call automation. The machines which we have developed are doing their work only too well, including some tasks which we had long thought could be done only by human hands and heads. Not only the blue-collar worker but also the white-collar worker seems to be faced with the possibility of technological unemployment.

The increase in size and cost of modern machinery has led to a situation in which larger and larger amounts of capital are necessary to get many businesses started. This has had a double effect. First, land has become less important than other forms of capital. This has changed the position of individuals and states. Their economic status now depends on their ability to control capital relative to other individuals, companies, and states. The second effect has been a pyramiding of the control of credit. This has gone through various stages from the days of the Fuggers until the present, when the ultimate control of credit is in the hands of the state.

One result of these technological and financial developments has been a loss of status for the individual. Or, perhaps we would be more accurate if we described this shift in terms of an exchange of one status for another. Significantly, corporations enjoy the status of persons in the eyes of the law, with all that that entails. As taxes on private inheritance have mounted, these corporations, with a relatively permanent life, have gone on accumulating their inheritance over the generations in spite of increasing taxes on their profits. As these institutions have grown, the
individual appears to have shrunk in size and lost in independence.

True, the individual may now handle machinery which he could never afford to buy, but the decisions about the purposes for which it is to be used are not his. True, he may make decisions and issue orders affecting large numbers of people, but these also are within limits which have already been set for him. And it is partly because of this situation that, in place of the image of the pioneer, we today have an image of "the man in the gray flannel suit," "the organization man," "the status seeker," or "the company man." This may go a long way toward accounting for the popularity of movies and television programs which return us to an earlier time.

A second factor in our contemporary social life is the increase in specialization. Here again is something not new. It has been part of man's life since earliest times. But within the framework of an industrialized society, the quantitative increase in specialization has been of such a magnitude as to accomplish a qualitative change. In many industries the only non-specialist is either the chairman of the board or the maintenance man. Workers must focus their attention on ever smaller parts of their product, and in some cases never see the finished product at all. It is small wonder, then, that the words used to refer to their economic activity have changed. Gone is the Reformation use of "vocation." It is just too difficult to apply the full connotation of this word within the framework of modern industry. During the 1920's man often referred to his occupation as his "game." Nowadays words that he often uses are "racket" and "rat race." While this change in vocabulary is due also to other factors, it reflects the specialization of modern industrial methods.

Contemporary man tends to divide his whole life into separate compartments. He sees it in terms of vocation and vacation, with increasing emphasis on the latter. Or he sees it in terms of the days of the week: five for work, one for play, and one for religion. Or he divides it along interest lines such as "art for art's sake," "business is business," and "no economics or politics from the pulpit." The result of this division is the fragmentation of life. This phrase highlights the fact that there seems to be no place from which it is possible to see life "steadily and see it whole." There is a lack of perspective, and of priority in terms of which a man may arrange the various aspects of his life in order of their importance. And there is a lack of any basic understanding among these various aspects. The man who says, "I only work here," or "I'm just doing my job; don't take it out on me," merely is giving expression to this fragmentation. If, for example, politics must be kept out of the pulpit, then there is little ground for communica­tion between the clergyman and the politician. Many cross-area discussions, if they ever do get started, are apt to end with some such statement as: "I don't know anything about art (or politics, business, or religion), but I know what I like." Such a state­ment should be the beginning, and not the end, of a discussion.
Another result of specialization and fragmentation is that persons have no basis for common or community action. When life is seen from a compartmentalized point of view, the only time that an individual is likely to become concerned is when his own special interests are directly involved. If his home is involved, he gets excited about zoning. If his children get a poor teacher, he complains to the neighbors about the school board. If his car breaks down, he "gripes" to his dealer. And the dealer complains about the distributor, who is apt to explain the whole matter in terms of the owner's having gotten a "lemon." But the car owner, the parent, or the home owner, has no basis for any sustained action. Indeed, he may well rely on the same set of phrases to protect his own work. And it is this which often keeps him from carrying the matter any further. In such ways as these we can see how specialization, in itself capable of good, when carried to extremes can easily lead from fragmentation to frustration.

A third major factor in our contemporary social life is the introduction of an ideal commensurate with both industrialization and specialization, the value of efficiency. The major sources of this ideal have been industry and the other forms of business, from which it has spread and gained widespread acceptance. This value is usually interpreted as including three elements: cutting of waste in all its forms, an increase in the number of units produced, and the development of the greatest possible speed in the overall process. The long-term goal is profit and staying in business. No organization that must compete can afford to be less than efficient. To this end modern industry has developed its corps of efficiency experts who circulate about our plants making time and motion studies of the processes of production.

Many people today deplore mass production because, they say, the emphasis on quantity diminishes the emphasis on quality. There are three things to be noted in this connection. First, only by mass production has Western man for the first time in his history been able to rise much above the age-long struggle for mere subsistence and survival. Second, some of the impermanence of our contemporary products is due, not to their built-in obsolescence, but rather to modern man's desire to have the very latest gadget. While some firms may use this desire to their own advantage, the very thing which makes it possible is the demand for something new and different without waiting for the old to wear out. This demand, in turn, has been stimulated and augmented by vast advertising efforts. And third, in our society, any attempt to guarantee quality completely would entail powerful bureaucratic enforcement such as few people would tolerate.

Many workers deplore efficiency because of its apparent denial of the human element. Because of this attitude many firms employ specialists in personnel management who, in the interest of better labor and management relations, have made elaborate studies in which they have varied the factors surrounding work. They have improved the lighting, introduced music, or changed the timing.
These experiments have often resulted in greater speed and efficiency, but, as one case proved, as soon as the experiment was over, speed and efficiency dropped back to the original level. The conclusion is that it was not the changes in working conditions which were most important, but the feeling on the part of the workers that management was really interested in them, and that their work had some significance.

Another factor in contemporary social life is the increase in size of our institutions. Industry early discovered, as we have seen, that it could perform its role better and more efficiently as it became larger. Building bridges across the gaps created by specialization became necessary aspects of business, and led to tremendous expansion on the part of management. The resultant size of industry brought it into contact with society on ever-widening fronts which, in turn, created a new army of experts in these relations, such as marketing, advertising, and public relations.

Business expansion was followed by an increase in the urban populations which sprang up around the factories, and then of the office buildings to house the new corps of specialists. To produce new and much needed services for modern industry there was an increase in the demands on political institutions which resulted in the further expansion of government. And, in order to bargain on an equal basis with big business, the workers banded themselves together into unions which steadily increased in size and strength on the assumption that the only way to counteract size is with size, and power with power. So also the social units of a man's life expanded; some increased in size and others were founded to cater to his specialized needs and interests. Everywhere contemporary man turns he seems to be less and less a whole unit, more and more a smaller fraction of larger and larger wholes.

One of the places where this condition manifests itself most clearly is a general meeting of almost any one of these institutions, be it business, church, political party, or school. The framework of the meeting is often limited to what those in authority presume to be good for the institution, its role in society at large seldom being considered. General and open discussion is severely limited, because it "does not get us anywhere." Questions to be raised have to be put on the agenda before the meeting begins. Most of the time is taken up with reports from various committees, many of which are appointed rather than elected. The members are confronted with a series of prejudged alternative courses of action, with little or no opportunity to explore different possibilities. They are in the position of the independent voter who has no choice in picking the candidates. Having acted upon a series of proposals, the members are then subjected to a series of announcements, the length and nature of which may depend largely on the presiding officer. Following this the members may be given the opportunity to make some brief
announcements of their own, after which the meeting is dismissed. On the way out, some of the officers may be overheard to say that the meeting went "smoothly," and that their recommendations were "put through" easily, neither of which expressions is calculated to make the listener think highly of the fraction that he is, or take kindly to the various attempts to stir up enthusiasm for the institution.

A result of this general increase in size of our institutions and of experiences such as the above has been the lessening of man's feeling of free responsibility, and an increase in the feeling that he cannot accomplish anything on his own. It has been hard for him not to conclude that the major decisions are made by an elite at the top. Therefore contemporary man has developed a double ethic, one for his relations with individuals and another for his relations with institutions. He may be willing to cheat an institution in a way in which he would never think of cheating an individual. Our "expense-account morality" is but one example of this split ethic. Another example can be taken from the title of one of the influential books of the 1930's: Moral Man and Immoral Society.

Along with this split ethic is contemporary man's feeling of frustration when confronted by huge institutions of which he feels himself but a smaller and smaller fraction. If he thought that he was capable of doing something, his approach to the ethical problem might very well be quite different. His frustration, however, only strengthens the idea of a split ethic. As a result of this combination of feelings, he may not only cheat his institutions whenever he can, but also make demands on them largely in terms of what he thinks he will be able to get from them. Whatever concessions he can get are seldom judged in terms of their value or justice; they are but stepping-stones to further concessions. He will get whatever he can because he is convinced that the interests of the institutions he confronts are not his own. In response to this attitude most institutions try to evoke participation and loyalty. Most people look upon such efforts primarily as selfish propaganda, designed solely to perpetuate and strengthen the institution, its bureaucracy, and its power.

These four major factors -- industrialization, specialization, speed and efficiency, and sheer size -- have all acted in concert upon our social life. Each one, as we have seen, is related to the development of that largest of all current institutions, the national state. Contemporary organization man has tried in a number of ways to hold back or escape from the tidal wave of size and power which appears to threaten his most prized possession, his personal freedom and integrity. A number of these ways will be treated later in this chapter; at this point we must try to see how these factors have affected our institutions, especially the modern state.

The parallel between military organization and contemporary institutions has often been drawn, and with good reason. Both have
a chain of command. There is at the top an elite or general staff which makes decisions on matters of policy. These policy decisions have two dimensions: they set the course for a particular institution, and they determine its relations with other institutions. At the other end of the chain of command are the workers who may have nothing at all to do with policy making. Theirs is only the task of carrying out in very specialized areas the decisions that have been made by others, a task which admittedly may involve making policy, if only on a small scale. During the past few years another development has been taking place which is of the utmost importance for Western Civilization. This is the growth of the white-collar class, the technicians and managers, for example, which today constitutes the largest percentage of the working population. The members of this new middle class cannot be hired and fired as readily as those of the lower class can be. Because they are necessary, they have a status which remains relatively secure and at a relatively high level. Their strength lies not in their hands but in their heads. Their desires are different from those of the working classes of a century ago. Like the working classes, they want economic security, but it must be noted that their relative security is much higher than anything hitherto envisaged by them or achieved by the working classes. Because of this they are not much interested in unions, a fact which poses a problem for union organizers. Their desires are no longer couched in terms of cars, television sets, and vacations. These are assured. Their interests are cultural rather than economic, in travel, art, and education.

The contribution of this new middle class has made them accepted, if not welcome, among the policy makers. As specialists and consultants they are often called upon to help decide matters of policy. Such a role explains how we may find a young Ph.D. sitting next to the chairman of the board of one of our larger institutions, with his remarks closely attended. However, how does the young man move up to the policy level on whose fringes he sits, if he should want that? Those at the top level are apt to look at the technician as a mere specialist whose services they are willing to reward generously, but who is lacking in the general perspective necessary for the making of policy. And the specialist, if invited to step to the higher level, is apt to balance carefully his current situation against the demands of policy making.

Another set of relations exists between this new middle class and the class below it. The benefits which the laborers have won for themselves are accepted by this new class, and much more, as their own due. And so it is easy to understand why they are sometimes resented by the others. The decisions made by technicians and administrators are mandatory for the workers who have little to say about how their work shall be done. In slack times white-collar men are apt to be kept on while the blue-collar workers are laid off. This new class represents a fixed charge on the institution, one which must be borne if it is to compete with similar institutions. This situation has radically changed the structure of American life. In place of the older division between worker and owner, the
Basic cleavage is now between three classes: workers, technicians and managers, and policy makers. This means that the workers can no longer rely as strongly as before on their sheer weight of numbers to win concessions. In such a situation it is understandable that they should see this new class as a threat to their own security.

This rearrangement of men in the labor force has served to highlight the need for new methods of communication between the various levels in American business. The old-fashioned picture is gone of the owner-manager taking off his coat, rolling up his sleeves, and showing the worker how to do the job. Gone too is the picture of the son and heir hard at work learning the trade with some trusted employee. About the only place where close personal relationships do exist today is among the specialists. Don't fool that this is an area of great promise, for here is where new ideas can be born.