

The Academic Revolution

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WE FACE TWO serious revolutionary movements in America today, the black revolution and the student revolt. This is not news. Nearly everyone seems to be not only concerned with these issues, but speaking and writing about them also. I would not add my voice to the multitude if I did not believe that the student revolution, which I take to be the far more serious of the two, is not widely understood and that its full significance is little appreciated.

I think the time has come for us to look at this phenomenon seriously and in depth. Too many people simply see the student revolt as a generation, brought up on Dr. Spock's permissiveness and spoiled by affluence, which is throwing temper tantrums to get what it wants. Too many people see the student movement simply as idealistic youth, discouraged by our institutional imperfections and failures, who are morally concerned and working for a better world.

Unlike the black revolution, which seeks fulfillment of ideals and principles long accepted in Western civilization, the stu-

dent movement, in its most radical and advanced form, if I understand it correctly, is calling into question not only the principles of Western civilization, but civilization itself. It is not, I suggest, some temporary phenomenon of this generation's making, but rather the logical unfolding of commitments deep within the modern Western mind, brought to its present stage largely by the success of our educational programs. It is, I submit, a *reductio ad absurdum* of our modern Western civilization. This is a strong statement but I shall try to indicate some of the considerations that have brought me to this shattering conclusion.

The student revolt is more than an attack on the existing structures of our educational institutions. It has little to do with irritation over existing requirements, regulations, administrative red tape, and teaching methods as such. Granted there are students whose attention is focused on these matters; who do not fully understand what they are caught up in and are a part of. But

the movement as such, and this is clear in the minds of many of the leaders, is aimed at the total structure of our civilization. Many deeply feel that life within our culture is meaningless, even for the most successful.

They regard our culture as materialistic. And in this they are right. Technological progress and its benefits are the dominant values of our way of life. Even our concern for people is a concern that everyone share in the benefits of technology. Poverty is the deepest hell we know; wealth the highest heaven. We wage war on poverty with a moral and religious zeal. So our technological-industrial system, which alone makes possible the achievement of our highest cultural values, takes precedence over everything else. Whatever impedes it must go; all that promotes it must be embraced. On this, Communists, socialists, and capitalists are in agreement. They disagree only on how to organize and to promote the technological-industrial complex to serve better our materialistic values. Their disagreements are basically family squabbles within our modern Western culture.

The complex technological-industrial system with big corporations, big labor unions, big governmental bureaucracies, big political party organizations, big universities, etc., is seen as impersonal and all powerful. Individuals have to fit into and serve the system. The universities, indeed our entire educational system, are seen as part of society's capital investment to prepare people to fit into and to serve the technological-industrial system. This view is shared by many supporters of the existing social structure. On May 20, 1968, William F. May, Chairman of the Board and President of American Can Company, said in a speech before the Council for Financial Aid to Education, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, that corporations should contribute to higher education because in doing so

“(1) . . . we are investing in our future manpower needs, (2) . . . because an educated people will be less likely to abandon our free enterprise economic system, and (3) . . . if for no other reason—because an educated society is a society which produces more, earns more, conserves more, and therefore, makes it possible for business to prosper more.” (*Vital Speeches*, no. 19 [July 15, 1968], p. 601.)

It is not only that the universities mold and prepare people to fit into the technological-industrial system, but the universities themselves are thoroughly controlled and shaped by the demands of the system. This cuts much deeper than is usually recognized. It is not just that universities are responding to the research needs of the industrial-military complex at the expense of teaching students; nor that university programs are controlled by the needs of society. Granted, of course, much student protest is directed at these relatively superficial ways in which the university is controlled by the society. But let us explore deeper ways in which our materialistic values and our technological-industrial system shape and control our educational system and our entire culture.

Our modern Western civilization is defined by our basic attitude toward the world. In the classical Greek-Christian tradition, man stood in the world asking “What does reality require of me? How can I fulfill these requirements? How can I become what I ought to be and do what I ought to do?” The culture-generating position of Western man shifted between the thirteenth and the seventeenth centuries to that of man standing before the world asking “How can I impose my will upon the world? How can I manipulate, control, and exploit it for my own purposes? How can I get what I want?” This shift wrought a great revolution in Western civilization that is only now approaching its climax.

This new situation gave rise to fresh ways of looking at things and a kind of knowledge that was power, that was know-how, in the manipulation and control of things. It was thus that modern science was born. It was no accident that the new science served technology. The scientific method and the scientific mentality were forged from within a technological framework. This is not to deny that there is pure science distinct from technology. Most scientists, no doubt, are concerned with and motivated by purely intellectual problems. They want only to know and to understand. But what I am saying is that the scientific methodology, concepts of knowledge and of explanation, and indeed the whole conceptual system within which the modern pure scientist operates, have been shaped by this modern attitude toward the world.

Within the scientific approach, we count as relevant and genuine only such knowledge as would be useful in the manipulation and control of things. The correlative of this is that we count as real only that which we would have to take account of and deal with in controlling and manipulating changes in our world. As the dominant concern of Western man became that of imposing his will upon his world, the modern scientific conception of knowledge became dominant. This generated the naturalistic view of the world, which now pervades our entire culture.

Since the only way we can manipulate and control things is through either direct or indirect physical contact with them, naturalism regards sensory perception as our only data-gathering faculty. Therefore, it is taken as providing us with all the semantic ties between language and the world and thus as the foundation of all of our descriptive and explanatory concepts. Furthermore, sensory perception is said to provide us with all the evidence on which the house of knowledge is built. It

follows, of course, that in our philosophical view of the world we must take reality to be the way it is delineated in the conceptual system of empirical science.

Once we accept the naturalistic view of knowledge and the world, traditional Western culture is disturbed at its very foundations. There are tremendous adjustments to be worked out. Just as modern science has struggled to free itself from anthropomorphic, animistic, and value concepts in its descriptive-explanatory account of things because they could not be grounded in sensory perception, the modern mind has struggled to exorcise these elements from its philosophical view of the world. This requires a subjectivistic interpretation of the humanistic dimension of our culture, including mathematics, philosophy, the arts, ethics, normative social and political thought, religion, and theology. The modern mind has been working at making these adjustments, trying to achieve consistency, throughout the past three centuries. All that is inconsistent with the basic attitude of modern man and the naturalistic view of knowledge and reality tends to get crowded out. Thus far the naturalistic position seems to be secure and all that is incompatible with it yields in one way or another, even though it may take centuries for it to be completely uprooted. Much of the legacy of the Greek-Christian civilization is still very much with us in the twentieth century; but it is being eliminated at a more rapid rate than ever before. This is due to the success of our educational system, especially in higher education. The more knowledgeable and self-aware the people become the more they feel the ambivalences and logical incongruities within our culture, and as they struggle toward consistency the more purely naturalistic our culture becomes.

As the modern mind moves toward a

naturalistic consensus through the success of our universities and other educational institutions, the intellectual and moral foundations of our social and political institutions are eroded. The whole structure of authority and institutional life is undermined, for it is held that there is no moral knowledge and that there are no objective moral values.

In most cultures, the institutions and the way of life of the society are grounded in the envisaged cosmic order. Our own institutions were once thought of as grounded in natural law as classically conceived. Also the tie between a style of life and the cosmic order is usually portrayed by religious symbols, myths, and practices. This gives social and political institutions stability and authority in shaping the lives of individuals. But a subjectivistic interpretation of value experience, which is a logical necessity within naturalism, gives rise to a world-view which cuts the institutions and the style of life of a society loose from the cosmic order. Once this happens, morality is conceived in a utilitarian fashion and the institutions of the society are grounded in the general happiness. But naturalism seems to push on from an inner logic beyond a subjectivistic view of value experience to even a subjectivistic view of value thought. With this development even the utilitarian foundations collapse.

There are several ways in which moral judgments are either explained away or interpreted in a way that is consistent with this nihilistic thesis. The most widely accepted view seems to be that a moral judgment is the expression of one's personal, life-constituting decision that is in no way responsible to anything and cannot be spoken of as correct or incorrect in any sense. This new view of morality is simply a formulation of the basic attitude of modern man toward the world. One's will need

not be materialistic in content, as no doubt modern man's has been for the most part. Nonetheless, each man, according to the new morality, stands asking "What is my will? And how can I live by it alone?" It is held that there is no room for rational argument where one's basic will is concerned. The only question is whether one is free, whether one's will is truly one's own. Anyone, it is said, who recognizes or feels obligations is not free.

On this basis, it is not only our particular civilization that is under attack. Civilization itself is condemned. Institutionalized life, any regulation of behavior, is deemed oppressive. Only a participatory democracy, in which individuals join in collective action only when it is the decision of each to do so with each free to withdraw at will, is to be tolerated. This, of course, would be pure anarchy, and it seems clear that civilization would not be possible under such conditions. "The author of *The Magic Mountain* once said," Lionel Trilling writes, "that all his work could be understood as an effort to free himself from the middle class, and this, of course, will serve to describe the chief intention of all modern literature. . . . The end is not merely freedom from the middle class but freedom from society itself. I venture to say that the idea of losing oneself up to the point of self-destruction, of surrendering oneself to experience without regard to self-interest or conventional morality, of escaping wholly from the societal bonds, is an 'element' somewhere in the mind of every modern person who dares to think of what Arnold in his unaffected Victorian way called 'the fullness of spiritual perfection.'" ("On the Modern Element in Modern Literature." in Irving Howe, *Literary Modernism*, Fawcett Publications, Greenwich, Connecticut, 1967, pp. 81-82.)

The movement toward a consistent naturalism in our culture has produced not

only the death of God, but the death of man. In fact, as Trilling indicates, our culture seems to have an ideal of spiritual perfection that draws us on, like lemmings, to self-destruction and spiritual death. There is little doubt that man is suffering spiritual anguish in our culture. Our literature and art portray man as alienated, alone, anguished, and despairing, without a sense of purpose or meaning. Existentialist philosophers who conceive of man in an otherwise naturalistic world, tell us that this is the only authentic, self-aware life possible for man. Not to suffer alienation, anguish, and despair is to be not fully human.

In writing about how his students respond to his course on modern literature at Columbia, Lionel Trilling says: "One response . . . —the readiness of the students to engage in the process that we might call the socialization of the anti-social, or the acculturation of the anti-cultural, or the legitimization of the subversive. When the term-essays come in, it is plain to me that almost none of the students have been taken aback by what they have read: they have wholly contained the attack. The chief exceptions are the few who simply do not comprehend, although they may be awed by, the categories, of our discourse. In their papers, like poor hunted creatures in a Kafka story, they take refuge first in misunderstood large phrases, then in bad grammar, then in general incoherence. After my pedagogical exasperation has run its course, I find that I am sometimes moved to give them a queer respect, as if they had stood up and said what in fact they don't have the wit to stand up and say: 'Why do you harry us? Leave us alone. We are not Modern Man. We are the Old People. We serve the little Old Gods, the gods of the copybook maxims, the small, dark, somewhat powerful deities of lawyers, doctors, engineers, accountants.' With them is

neither sensibility nor *angst*. With them is no disgust—it is they, indeed, who make ready the way for 'the good and the beautiful' about which low-minded doubts have been raised in this course, that 'good and beautiful' which we do not possess and don't want to possess but which we know justifies our lives. Leave us alone and let us worship our gods in the way they approve, in peace and unawareness.' Crass, but . . . authentic. The rest, the minds that give me the A papers and the B papers and even the C+ papers, move through the terrors and mysteries of modern literature like so many Parsifals, asking no questions at the behest of wonder and fear; or like so many seminarists who have been systematically instructed in the constitution of hell and the ways of damnation; or like so many *readers*, entertained by moral horror stories. I asked them to look into the Abyss, and, both dutifully and gladly, they have looked into the Abyss." He adds: "For many students no ideas that they will encounter in any college discipline will equal in force and sanction the ideas conveyed to them by modern literature." (*Ibid.*, pp. 78-81.)

It is only within this cultural picture, I think, that we can fully understand the present student revolution. Accepting the modern attitude toward the world and the naturalistic world-view and the theory of culture, especially of morality, that it generates, as taught in our universities today, but distressed by the quality of life that our civilization makes possible—the alienation, aloneness, boredom, sense of futility, and meaninglessness, and the like, which have long been widely felt and recognized by the best-educated and the most aware in our society, and, unlike the existentialists and the beatniks, unwilling to accept such anguish and spiritual suffering as the authentic condition of man, student revolutionaries blame it all on the powerlessness

of the individual in our society to live by his own will alone. They, like Rousseau, see men everywhere enslaved by the system, but, unlike Rousseau, they recognize no way in which their bonds can be legitimized. Therefore, their goal is to destroy the whole system, beginning with the universities that feed the entire system with trained men and the scientific knowledge on which it is based. Once the system is no more, men allegedly will be able to live by their own will. Primitive life with its freedom of the individual is preferred by many to civilization with its social, economic, and political institutions.

Thus, the modern mind, with its culture-defining stance before the world, in working itself out toward consistency, repudiates the civilization it has itself generated. This is why I said in the beginning that the present student revolt, which I interpret as a phase in the logical unfolding of the modern mind, constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of our modern Western culture.

You will notice that I have argued that the present student revolution is a development within the modern mind, and not a revolution against it. It leaves intact man's modern attitude toward his universe and the naturalistic theory of knowledge, reality, and culture that it generates. The revolt is only against institutionalized society.

The student revolution, in my judgment, is based on a misunderstanding of modern man's spiritual malaise. If modern man should achieve freedom as he conceives it, if he should become freed from the institutions of society, if he should feel no demands of society upon him, if he should feel no obligations of any kind, and thus should be subject to only his own will, it is not at all clear that he would find his life meaningful and worthwhile. Indeed, it is more likely that such freedom, in a world otherwise conceived naturalistical-

ly, is just what generates the alienation, aloneness, anguish, and despair that the existentialists make so much of, rather than the felt repression of institutions which, from within the perspective of naturalism, have lost their aura of authority and legitimacy.

In fact, it is, I believe, precisely the naturalistic view of the world, society, and culture, with the resulting existentialist view of the self and freedom, that gives rise to our spiritual blight. If this is so, then any revolution that could touch our fundamental problems would have to attack our basic stance before the world and the naturalistic theory of knowledge, reality, and culture that it generates. Such a revolution cannot be achieved by impatient activists. It requires deep and profound philosophical understanding of the human mind and of our culture.

I have become convinced that our modern naturalistic mind is deranged in such a way that we cannot know reality as it is, nor cope with it, and live successfully. The spiritual malaise of our culture is our general awareness of this derangement, much as feeling ill is an awareness that one's body is not functioning properly. The philosophical perplexities that our culture generates indicate the acute intellectual trouble spots in our basic assumptions. What we need is not social revolution by violent activists. They will cure nothing, for they themselves are infected with the derangement of which we need to be cured. We need cultural therapy through philosophical analysis and understanding.

While it is true that our universities are largely shaped by the basic attitude of modern Western civilization and the resulting naturalistic conception of knowledge and reality, and that they, in moving the modern mind toward consistency, are eroding the intellectual and moral foundations of our institutions, it is nonetheless the

case that it is only in our universities and the kind of intellectual life that they foster that there is any possibility of transcending the provincialism of the modern mind to gain a critical perspective on it. Our universities can best serve our civilization by being its severest critic. In this role, no discipline is more important than philosophy. Yet I must confess that philosophy, for the most part, has been the handmaiden of the modern mind, moving it toward con-

sistency within its own fundamental naturalistic assumptions. But even this hastens judgment on the basic stance itself. The time is ripe, I think, for hard-headed critical examination of the Western mind by serious students of our culture. Shifts in these assumptions would indeed revolutionize our universities and even our whole civilization. This is what our brightest students should be challenged to do. This is where the problems are and where the action ought to be.