

PROTESTING VOICES:
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A WAY OF HEARING

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But far more dangerous are the others, who began when you were children, and took possession of your minds with their falsehoods. . . . Socrates, from *The Apology*.

FLEXIBILITY and diversity of values represented within a pluralistic society are unique qualities of modern life. America, with a tradition of revolution and protest, was born from the notion that change is a fundamental element of progress. Sometimes that change is so startling that only revolution and conflict seem to be the means of assimilating the change into a reality. The inability to adapt to the evolving qualities of one's culture may produce revolution. Thus people, when confronted with the opportunities of freedom, frequently make a distinctive retreat and escape to avoid its consequences, claimed Fromm (1941).

When change is so threatening, many individuals, not surprisingly, abandon rationality for security. Such a discomfoting situation today is found in American society. Indeed, we are currently wrestling with the attempt to determine which course America is to accept: adapting to the necessary changes, retreating from progress and development, or degenerating into a battleground of protest and conflict. Cultural survival may well depend upon the decision we make.

Commager (1950) made a significant observation when he noted that America had undergone a significant transition about the turn of the century. In his terms, a "watershed" of ideas, beliefs, and values had occurred. For many, America was built upon traditions and customs, inviolate and absolute. To reject these values was deemed open heresy. Many institutions, including the church and the school, were vested with authority to perpetuate these customs. When the customs became anachronisms, these institutions persisted in defending them. The result was a dichotomy between the traditions of the past and the realities of the present.

Other Americans, some being progressive to a fault, accepted the change enthusiastically and in haste. Interestingly, the emerging culture at the turn of the century—largely urban, industrial, socially complex, mechanistic, and impersonal—is now the same traumatic sociological milieu that we are questioning. Whereas the pioneer ravaged the wilderness, destroyed the frontier, enslaved one race and attempted to exterminate another, and pillaged the natural resources, today the entrepreneur has polluted the environment, dehumanized production, and

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strangled the cities. Again we are being asked to reappraise our values and, if necessary, allow the watershed influence to occur again.

Numerous evidences have been presented in examining the social and confidence crises that have developed. Gardner (1964) advised that a time of "self-renewal" was necessary if society were to survive. Creativity, rejuvenation, versatility, commitment, and innovation were necessary components. Yet the problems persisted: a morally disastrous and divisive war; obvious disregard of human rights; prizing objects more than human values; diffused priorities and objectives; and a fear of internal decay. Self-renewal is important and few would dispute the claim, yet hollow rhetoric and contradictory aspirations are indeed spawning grounds for conflict. This society needs to regenerate its enthusiasm for the development of growth, since civilization itself depends upon such endeavors.

Toffler (1970) effectively described the consequences of a society that is racing toward futurity with such speed that the acceptance and accommodation of the future does not find its place in the individual's mind. Indeed, the accumulation of new knowledge, new products, and new possibilities may inundate man with his own progress. Obsolescence occurs faster than the knowledge can be used, the technology applied, or the benefits realized. Under such circumstances, the bewildered individual ought to protest; and when protest becomes unheard, then conflict is an alternative. Presently we are attempting to alleviate the "future shock" of our own civilization that is upon us and hence avoid more protests and more conflicts.

The Myriad of Experiences

In addition to the magnitude of "mass civilization," currently we are attempting to understand the range of experiences that we

have. When Commager wrote about the "watershed of the nineties," he had time to analyze the results of history. Today the myriad of experiences is so extensive that a historian would have difficulty in cataloging the data alone without attempting to interpret it. The variety and intensity of these experiences have produced a new phenomenon in human development. Instead of being intellectually or socially starved, which frequently was a dilemma in past periods, man today seeks a refuge from the sheer volume of the things happening about him. Wars, disasters, inventions, discoveries, diseases, knowledge, research, implementations *ad infinitum* are poured over him.

The medium (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967) is indeed the message. We are being worked upon by such a variety of experiences that modern man is having difficulty finding a quiet corner in which he might hide. Immediate retrieval systems provide more information than is needed. Television provides visual stimulation of the real events of the world. Instead of reading about the invasion of Normandy, the enslaved video generation become participants. "You Are There" is a literal concept. Violence, destruction, and pathos are sensed as reality.

Previously, man escaped through his literature, was entertained by the motion pictures, was informed by the radio and newspaper, and was expressive through his written and oral conversations. Today, he is manipulated and used. If he speaks, who is there to listen? If he understands, to whom may he communicate? Modern man appears obsessively addicted to his experiences, not because he is enlightened by them, but because he is regulated and indoctrinated by them. This total-involvement experience seems to absorb the mind rather than liberate it. Individuals without these experiences appear to be somehow culturally deprived. Again, protest and conflict seem to be justifiable responses for an individual, segment, or society that has had so many experiences

that its sensibilities are dulled and its awareness is deadened.

Another critical consequence of our society is the role of the "educated man." Hofstadter (1963) accurately described the critical stance of Americans toward the intellectual. We typically shared an "anti-intellectualism," an open suspicion, if not contempt, for the man of scholarly ways. The "egghead" generation was condemned as being a brain trust and not like other folks. Perhaps this anti-intellectualism has been successful in eliminating the intellectual from our society. Specialization, technocracy, automation, cybernetics, and scholarly snobbery have contributed to the demise of the intellectual. Mass education, without enlightenment and growth, produced babblings of rhetoric but euphemisms inappropriate for today's problems.

Instead of relying upon the rational abilities of its people, society has allowed itself to be darkened by its technological artifacts. The human contribution has subsequently been reduced. With so many problems, the rationality of all individuals needs to be respected and utilized instead of neglected and abused. With thoughtless leaders, irresponsible action, and faulty intentions, society has become increasingly suspicious of the "educational market." Its hypocrisy is most obvious to the students in the high schools and universities. They notice the discrepancy between the admonishments and professings of their elders and reality. Disillusionment and alienation are overt reactions of the disenchanting youth toward the intellectual disregard that society seems to have. Students are not prized and, therefore, they find little cause for investment in a society that places educational hurdles and obstacles in their way. Their creativity, enthusiasm, and insights have been neglected. Surprisingly, their protest is fragmented instead of uniform and universal.

Reappraisal of Roles

Institutions—religious, social, political, economic, educational—are reappraising the roles that they are expected to play. Bland

anachronisms and shallow truisms reflect the superficiality of the examinations that have been given the critical issues of today. Providing unlimited education has again furnished evidence that this experiment is indeed an "imperfect panacea" (Perkinson, 1968) to our problems.

Some maintained that establishing lines of communication would resolve the difficulties of dissent. Just talking seemed to them to be the solution to all differences. However, little resulted from the volumes of communication that occurred. In reality, many wearied of the continual discussions that were so low-yield in productivity. Others advised submission. Since fate and man had combined to hasten the demise of man, why not "smile through the apocalypse"?

Commitment was another ready-made cure for the basic sources of dissent and conflict. Indeed, the solution for many was to find a cause, become a "true believer," and demonstrate that commitment. A sudden rush to find a quixotic windmill became a full-time occupation for many. Such commitment, easily displayed but with ephemeral consequences, became a mockery for those who hoped for and anticipated change. The streets were filled, but the changes that occurred were painful and costly. Commitment, although absolutely necessary, may be prostituted into a vice, like any other virtue. Thus education, communication, submission, and commitment were not solutions to the problems that encouraged protest and conflict.

The values of a modern society change so quickly that one has difficulty identifying that which he really believes. This metamorphosis is reflected in changing sex mores, mobility in society and class, and differences in achievement and opportunity, which have startled all of us. Articulation and debate are nearly impossible when the values change so rapidly. And yet, from these sources and from the perceptions of changes in values, conflict, dissent, and animosity are generated.

The more pluralistic a society is in its tolerance of diverse values, the more prone that society is to protest and dissent. Those who widely proclaim "law and order" gen-

erally are those supporting autocratic measures, behavior-controlling agencies, and regimented legislation. These individuals would find it more secure to exist in a society with less freedom and more restrictions. Such a notion, however tempting according to Fromm's thesis, must be rejected by a civilization nurtured on the worth of the individual, the freedom of expression and diversity, and the respect for independence of thought and action.

To "Renew" Values

Therefore, since values and the degree of their acceptance are the sources of protest and conflicts among us, we must necessarily examine the values that we hold, the values we intend for society, and the values held by diverse groups. Perhaps solutions are not possible, but without a rationality about the values that cause conflict, we will not be capable of addressing ourselves to the real problems of society, only the tangential.

In such an endeavor to "renew" our values, we must be cautious of certain inherent tendencies. We must not permit the iconoclasts to destroy the civilization that has been acquired in the haste to disengage ourselves from our own conflicts. Such an "anti-historical" approach will provide us with narrow vision for the task of value redefinition. Indeed, "a man without tradition is as shaky as a fiddler on the roof," advises the Broadway musical. Conversely, we must not perpetuate tradition-traps that no longer serve us but imprison us. Continuing reappraisal of those values that agitate conflict and promote protest must be examined. Too frequently a value persists, not because of its utility or contribution, but because of the glittering reliance that it has provided in the past.

Potentially, man now has the rationality and intellectuality to provide a new generation with greater anticipations for the future than had any previous visionary or dreamer. Reflecting upon what man has done within the past two decades is but a beginning. Yet the lessons of the past have been most evident. A civilization either rides to its destiny

of greatness by the values that it creates or it degenerates in its own fateful anarchy by the consequences of its values. Contributing, worthwhile, enhancing, progressive, and creative values must not be replaced. They need to be revitalized and relearned.

To propose another simple panacea is not practical. However, a changing society has a possibility of resolving some of the sources of dissension and protest. When stagnation and atrophy occur, society is bound to a course of oblivion. Many of the disheartened antagonists contend that we have arrived at such a precipice. When a society stubbornly adheres to notions that permit the disregard of those who would dissent, that society is as guilty of intellectual stupidity as those that condemned Socrates, Christ, Galileo, and Luther. Modern heretics are equally disrupting to the comfortable schemes of the *status quo* elements as were their historical counterparts.

When some voices plead for an opportunity to incorporate new values, retain old ones, and continually scrutinize those things considered valuable by society, there is a hope for the future. Under such conditions, not only would society endure and civilization survive, but the sources of protest and the causes of conflict might be reduced. Indeed, this is the challenge of a truly educated society.

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