

Civilization is not yet an accomplished fact, but only an aspiration, a kind of well-meaning intention. Shall we ever transform the pandemonium we know as human society into a community of saints? Do all the horrors and humiliations of the twentieth century leave us with any basis for hope? The latest attempt radically to transform human society, the attempt based upon the social theories of Karl Marx, the attempt at social transformation which was expected to be matched by a transformation of human nature itself, now lies everywhere in ruins. What should be our attitude of mind and heart as one of the most spectacular commitments of thought and labor to the improvement of human life that has ever been attempted, an enterprise that has at once challenged us, bewildered us, and frightened us, now collapses before our very eyes?

The series of speakers we have heard these last Monday evenings have held up to us a very sobering panorama of social disintegration. The roots of this tragedy are actually quite old and go back about 7,000 years. For it was about 7,000 years ago that there occurred a series of events which have led us to the baffling situation we now face. In a series of strokes by anonymous intellectual geniuses it was discovered that certain stones on the earth's surface did not chip well for tools, but were malleable. Then it was discovered that when heated these stones became pliable, and were eventually liquified if the temperature were raised to a high enough degree. Next it was discovered that metals were found not only in a pure state but as a constituent element of ores, and that once again, through heat, metal could be extracted from ores. Finally, it was discovered that seemingly abundant supplies of ores were located underground, and could be obtained by mining. These discoveries were made between 7,000 and 2,800 years ago in different parts of the world, when the various ages of metallurgy began.

We now face two profound sets of consequences which result from these astounding discoveries. One we know as the ecological crisis. The age of metallurgy started a process of extracting non-renewable resources from the earth, which we now

know faces exhaustion. The age of metallurgy also introduced into human culture smelting and manufacturing practices which degrade the environment. Neither of these consequences--the exhaustion of the earth's resources and the degradation of the biosphere--became apparent as long as humankind's efforts remained small in scale; now these consequences are quite glaring and totally alarming.

But the second series of consequences of these astonishing technical discoveries were social consequences. Before the age of metallurgy, human beings for the most part were "Jills-and-Jacks-of-all-trades," largely responsible for and able to develop the wide range of skills necessary to care for themselves and their families. While an exchange of goods was practiced, this tended to be on a small scale and not essential to survival. But metallurgy ushered in a radical division of labor. The smiths and miners became the first specialists. Each had to devote the whole of his available working time to his craft, instead of continuing to be a Jack-of-all-trades, as the Paleolithic hunter and the Neolithic husbandman had been. Moreover, as mines developed there was the need for primitive engineers to construct and to maintain them, for scribes and accountants to keep track of transactions, and specialized merchants and tradespeople to distribute the product of the mining effort. Here arose a significant ethical problem. On what principle is the total product of society to be distributed among the various classes of producers? Who gets what, how, why, and when? The total product is the fruit of the cooperative work of all participants in society, but their respective contributions are unequal in effectiveness and value. The inequality is manifest. But can it be reflected in an allocation of shares recognized by all parties as being just? Ought an attempt at a just allocation be made? Or is it right, and perhaps inevitable, that the lion's share shall be appropriated by those who somehow wind up with preponderant power?

In spite of all the pundits who proclaimed that with the collapse of communism and the triumph of capitalism history has come to an end, I firmly believe that, oddly, after 7,000 years of human effort to address it, the fundamental question of how to

distribute the product of the human community's collective work is a question of social ethics and of political economics which has yet to be solved. So the first reaction that we as spiritual people should have in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Empire is an awareness that the situation points us, not to the end of history, but to an important historical task which lies ahead.

The second thing which, as Friends, we should think about, is that although we have a 300 year old tradition of seeking the guidance of the Spirit and giving witness to concerns arising from the groanings and miseries of our fellow human beings--issues like slavery, the treatment of prisoners, the oppression of women, justice for Native Americans, the scourge of war--today, when clearly the political economy is the chief locus of human suffering, Friends are uncharacteristically silent. Congress can be tearing itself apart over tax policy, certainly a profound issue of social justice, and Friends seem to have nothing to say. Surely the current American combination of mindless deregulation and boundless greed is unfriendly to the spirit of the New Testament. Surely the assumption that humankind's wants and needs will fuel an ever expanding mobilization of productive forces, which pits our economic life against the very biosphere which provides the basis for human survival, poses some challenge to the spiritual sensibility. We see a world-wide tension between mobile multinational economic actors, on the one hand, and territorially bound political communities which are scarcely able to protect the public interest in the territories they are supposed to govern, on the other. We see everywhere a threat to peace and freedom, and a snowballing erosion of human rights, wherever concentrated wealth collides with extreme poverty. This is true within the United States as well as in developing countries.

It is my hope that Pendle Hill can be a gathering place where Quaker economists, Quaker workers in inner city and rural poverty programs, Quaker overseas workers, and just plain concerned Friends can gather, share their various perspectives, and explore the matter of whether or not there is a Friends testimony

on economic issues for the twenty-first century.

Most Friends are deeply committed to social change, and even to social revolution. But as we contemplate the demise of the Soviet Union, we should reflect that there is perhaps not a single example in our time, or indeed in any other time, where a determined effort to produce immediate and sweeping change has not ended in tyranny, no matter how high-minded the original intention. Many liberal and compassionate Americans have been tempted to see a succession of revolutionaries as liberators--Fidel Castro, Mao Tse-Tung, Ho Chi Minh, the Sandinistas. As each of these idols failed people have moved their hopes to the next. We should, once and for all, dispel the idea that sympathy for the downtrodden requires acquiescence to revolutionary violence; that to insist on non-violence is a hang-up of comfortable middle class purism.

Nonviolent social change is the only way forward for several reasons. The first is that any culture is a complex fabric of habits, relationships, and beliefs. A culture is a comprehensive way of life and thought. People who grow up in different societies and different cultures are formed in different ways. They would be quite different persons if they had grown up elsewhere. To tamper with a person's culture is, in a profound way, to tamper with his very identity, with her or his fundamental human nature. Human beings are simply not so fickle that they can be easily uprooted from all this by revolutionaries. I notice that a lot of my peace movement and social activist colleagues, who talk a lot about social change, usually mean that it is people other than themselves who should do the changing, and that such people who are to change should come more to resemble the social activists themselves. I was in an office of social change activists when it became time to ban smoking from working areas shared by more than one person, and I can assure you that social activists do not find it easy to change their own way of life, even with respect to such peripheral matters as where they will light up a cigarette. This is why revolutionaries like Stalin and Pol Pot are sooner or later, usually sooner, driven to trying to wipe out

whole populations. People simply do not change their natures that easily. This is why non-violence is essentially an attempt to persuade rather than to force, and why it inevitably focusses on one issue at a time, or on a limited series of issues, carefully affirming what is good in the status quo as a set of common values, rather than attempting a total and instantaneous social renovation.

The second aspect of the situation has to do with the well known fact that in the field of human affairs the short-term and the long-term effects of social policies can be quite different. Something which seems to produce a salutary effect in the short run can be a long-term disaster, and something which can seem bitter medicine in the here and now can produce benefits over the long run.

All these things do not argue that all is hopeless, that improvement of the human lot is impossible. They are arguments for non-violent social change. They do support Edmund Burke's insight that if the body politic is ill, we do not go after it as if with a machete; rather we approach it as we would a wounded parent, with firmness of purpose but with tenderness.

Recently, when I was back in New York City where I used to live, I was going to early bird worship at Fifteenth Street Monthly Meeting. I was crossing Union Square Park on my way to meeting. It being early on a Sunday morning, the Park was quiet. In fact, it is nowadays a very sedate park at all hours. The surrounding neighborhood is becoming increasingly gentrified, and the Park's character as a rallying place for radical activities and union organizing is very much a thing of the past. Nevertheless, my eye caught a new bit a graffiti on the sidewalk. "DO NOT DESPAIR: SUBVERT" the graffiti exhorted, as if written by a ghost from times gone by.

I looked around at Union Square. All was peaceful. There was hardly anyone about on a cool, sunny Sunday morning. The amount of traffic was negligible.

Looking up Park Avenue South, the silent office buildings ranked in the clear air provided a visual study in light and shade on geometric forms, all bright, solid and innocent. It was hardly a scene which brought either despair or subversion to mind.

Yet we know that outward appearances can be deceptive. The graffiti writer had the more invisible dynamics of the political economy in mind, undoubtedly.

Since I was on my way to meeting for worship when the graffiti writer exhorted me not to despair but to subvert, I had the opportunity to reflect that religions are indeed, in their way, revolutionary. They, too, are seeking to nurture a new kind of human being through their explanation of the purpose and meaning of human life and their prescribed pattern of living which gives expression to these meanings. Religions also seek to generate a society better than any thus far seen on earth; they seek to bring the earthly city ever more close to the City of God.

But the subversion which religion teaches is different from that of a Union Square revolutionary. Jesus did not organize guerrilla warfare, nor did he encourage people clandestinely to subvert the political economy. But he was subversive of official values, standing many of them on their heads. He understood the full meaning of the commandment, "Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor any likeness of anything that is in heaven above; . . . thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them." This commandment does not only enjoin us from idols which are crude images, such as mental pictures of God as an elderly gentleman on a gilded throne. But we also must abandon the idols which are our cherished preconceptions of the truth, preconceptions which block the unreserved opening of the mind and the heart to the essential mystery of reality.

Even Jesus himself, regarded as the special and unique incarnation of God, becomes the source of life by the very act of being destroyed. To the disciples who tried to cling to his human form as the manifestation of divinity he explained,

"Unless a grain of corn fall into the ground and die, it remains alone. But if it dies it brings forth much fruit." Again, in the same vein, he said, "It is expedient for you that I go away, for if I go not away the Paraclete (the Holy Spirit) cannot come unto you."

As Friends of Jesus, our key subversive strategy is our silence. In a world so given to hype, to life made over in various teased, dyed and fantastic guises, to loud and coarse forms of entertainment, to violence, and to political debate based upon self-interest, our practice of silence is indeed a way of undermining the existing social order. Most especially, it undermines the key modern ideology shared by the right, the middle, and the left, by the establishment and the revolutionaries alike--the idea that humankind can exalt itself through its own self-creating acts. It is to wait in silence for divine leadings as to what, in existing circumstances, must unfailingly be done. It is to wait for leadings from God in a struggle against concrete, immediate and visible injustices, a struggle waged with the power of love; it is to avoid the idolization of grand designs of human invention which, with enormous hubris, pretend to eliminate the common root of all social wrongs, yet which can only be implemented through force.

Let us, then, remain faithful to our own truly subversive strategy--that silence which is attentiveness and availability to God's call in history.

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