

Our Way of Life Makes Us Miserable

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Most Americans believe that our society of consumption-happy, fun-loving, jet-traveling people creates the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Contrary to this view, I believe that our present way of life leads to increasing anxiety, helplessness and, eventually, to the disintegration of our culture. I refuse to identify fun with pleasure, excitement with joy, busyness with happiness, or the faceless, buck-passing „organization man“ with an independent individual.

From this critical view our rates of alcoholism, suicide and divorce, as well as juvenile delinquency, gang rule, acts of violence and indifference to life, are characteristic symptoms of our „pathology of normalcy.“ It may be argued that all these pathological phenomena exist because we have not yet reached our aim, that of an affluent society. It is true, we are still far from being an affluent society. (In 1962, almost one third of the population earned less than \$4,000 per household.) But the material progress made in the last decades allows us to hope that our system might eventually produce a materially affluent society. Yet will we be happier then? The example of Sweden, one of the most prosperous, democratic and peaceful European countries, is not very encouraging: Sweden, as is often pointed out, in spite of all its material security has among the highest alcoholism and suicide rates in Europe, while a much poorer country like Ireland ranks among the lowest in these respects. Could it be that our dream that material welfare per se leads to happiness is just a pipe dream?

Certainly the humanist thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries, who are our ideological ancestors, thought that the goal of life was the full unfolding of a person's potentialities; what mattered to them was the person who is much, not the one who has much or uses much. For them economic production was a means to the unfolding of man, not an end. It seems that today the means have become ends, that not only „God is dead,“ as Nietzsche said in the 19th century, but also man is dead; that what is alive are the organizations, the machines; and that man has become their slave rather than being their master.

Each society creates its own type of personality by its way of bringing up children in the family, by its system of education, by its effective values (that, is, those values that are rewarded rather than only preached). Every society creates the type of „social character“ which is needed for its proper functioning. It forms men who *want* to do what they *have* to do. What kind of men does our large-scale, bureaucratized industrialism need?

It needs men who cooperate smoothly in large groups, who want to consume more and more, and whose tastes are standardized and can be easily influenced and anticipated. It needs men who feel free and independent, yet who are willing to be commanded, to do what is expected, to fit into the social machine without friction; men who can be guided without force, led without leaders, prompted without an aim except the aim to be on the move, to function, to go ahead.

Modern industrialism has succeeded in producing this kind of man. He is the

„alienated“ man. He is alienated in the sense that his actions and his own forces have become estranged from him; they stand above him and against him, and rule him rather than being ruled by him. His life forces have been transformed into things and institutions, and these things and institutions have become idols. They are something apart from him, which he worships and to which he submits. Alienated man bows down before the works of his own hands. He experiences himself not as the active bearer of his own forces and riches but as an impoverished „thing,“ dependent on other things outside of himself. He is the prisoner of the very economic and political circumstances which he has created.

Since our economic organization is based on continuous and ever-increasing consumption (think of the threat to our economy if people did not buy a new car until their old one was really obsolete), contemporary industrial man is encouraged to be consumption-crazy. Without any real enjoyment, he „takes in“ drink, food, cigarettes, sights, lectures, books, movies, television, any new kind of gadget. The world has become one great maternal breast, and man has become the eternal suckling, forever expectant, forever disappointed.

Sex, in fact, has become one of the main objects of consumption. Our newsstands are full of „girlie“ magazines; the percentages of girls having premarital sexual relations and of unwed mothers are on a steep incline. It can be argued that all this represents a welcome emancipation from Victorian morality, that it is a wholesome affirmation of independence, that it reflects the Freudian principle that repression may produce neurosis. But while all these arguments are true to some extent, they omit the main point. Neither independence nor Freudian principle is the main cause of our present-day sexual freedom. Our sexual mores are part and parcel of our *cult of consumption*, whose main principle was so succinctly expressed by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*: „Never put off till tomorrow the fun you can have today.“ Nature has provided men and women with the capacity for sexual excitement; but excitement in consumption, whether it is of sex or any other commodity, is not the same as aliveness and richness of experience.

In general, our society is becoming one of giant enterprises directed by a bureaucracy in which man becomes a small, well-oiled cog in the machinery. The oiling is done with higher wages, fringe benefits, well-ventilated factories and piped music, and by psychologists and „human-relations“ experts; yet all this oiling does not alter the fact that man has become powerless, that he does not wholeheartedly participate in his work and that he is {10} bored with it. In fact, the blue- and the white-collar workers have become economic puppets who dance to the tune of automated machines and bureaucratic management.

The worker and employee are anxious, not only because they might find themselves out of a job (and with installment payments due); they are anxious also because they are unable to acquire any real satisfaction or interest in life. They live and die without ever having confronted the fundamental realities of human existence as emotionally and intellectually productive, authentic and independent human beings.

Those higher up on the social ladder are no less anxious. Their lives are no less empty than those of their subordinates. They are even more insecure in some respects. They are in a highly competitive race. To be promoted or to fall behind is not only a matter of salary but even more a matter of self-esteem. When they apply for their first job, they are tested for intelligence as well as for the right mixture of submissiveness and independence. From that moment on they are tested again and again--by the psychologists, for whom testing is a big business, and by their superiors, who judge their behavior; sociability, capacity to get along, etc., their own and that of their wives. This constant need to prove that one is as good as or better than one's fellow-competitor creates constant anxiety and stress, the very causes of unhappiness and psychosomatic illness.

The „organization man“ may be well fed, well amused and well oiled, yet he lacks a sense of identity because none of his feelings or his thoughts originates

within himself; none is authentic. He has no convictions, either in politics, religion, philosophy or in love. He is attracted by the „latest model“ in thought, art and style, and lives under the illusion that the thoughts and feelings which he has acquired by listening to the media of mass communication are his own.

He has a nostalgic longing for a life of individualism, initiative and justice, a longing that he satisfies by looking at Westerns. But these values have disappeared from real life in the world of giant corporations, giant state and military bureaucracies and giant labor unions. He, the individual, feels so small before these giants that he sees only one way to escape the sense of utter insignificance: He identifies himself with the giants and idolizes them as the true representatives of his own human powers, those of which he has dispossessed himself. His effort to escape his anxiety takes other forms as well. His pleasure in a well-filled freezer may be one unconscious way of reassuring himself. His passion for consumption--from television to sex--is still another symptom, a mechanism which psychiatrists often find in anxious patients who go on an eating or buying spree to evade their problems.

The man whose life is centered around producing, selling and consuming commodities transforms himself into a commodity. He becomes increasingly attracted to that which is man-made and mechanical, rather than to that which is natural and organic. Many men today are more interested in sports cars than in women; or they experience women as a car which one can use to race by pushing the right button. Altogether they expect happiness is a matter of finding a life which does not require making an effort and taking risks. In their search for the button, some go to the psychoanalyst, some go to church and some read „self-help“ books. But while it is impossible to find the button for happiness, the majority are satisfied with pushing the buttons of cameras, radios, television sets, and watching science fiction becoming reality.

One of the strangest aspects of this mechanical approach to life is the widespread lack of concern about the danger of total destruction by nuclear weapons, a possibility people are consciously aware of. The explanation, I believe, is that they are more proud of than frightened by the gadgets of mass destruction. Also, they are so frightened of the possibility of their personal failure and humiliation that their anxiety about personal matters prevents them from feeling anxiety about the possibility that everybody and everything may be destroyed. Perhaps total destruction is even more attractive than total insecurity and never-ending personal anxiety.

Am I suggesting that modern man is doomed and that we should return to the pre-industrial mode of production or to 19th-century „free enterprise“ capitalism? Certainly not. Problems are never solved by returning to a stage which one has already outgrown. I suggest transforming our social system from a bureaucratically managed industrialism in which maximal production and consumption are ends in themselves (in the Soviet Union as well as in the capitalist countries) into a humanist industrialism in which man and the full development of his potentialities--those of love and of reason--are the aims of all social arrangements. Production and consumption should serve only as means to this end, and should be prevented from ruling man.

To attain this goal we need to create a Renaissance of Enlightenment and of Humanism. It must be an Enlightenment, however, more radically realistic and critical than that of the 17th and 18th centuries. It must be a Humanism that aims at the full development of the total man, not the gadget man, not the consumer man, not the organization man. The aim of a humanist society is the man who loves life, who has faith in life, who is productive and independent. Such a transformation is possible if we recognize that our present way of life makes us sterile and eventually destroys the vitality necessary for survival.

Whether such transformation is likely is another matter. But we will not be able to succeed unless we see the alternatives clearly and realize that the choice is still ours. Dissatisfaction with our way of life is the first step toward changing it.

As to these changes, one thing is certain: They must take place in all spheres simultaneously--in the economic, the social, the political and the spiritual. Change in only one sphere will lead into blind alleys, as did the purely political French Revolution and the purely economic Russian Revolution. Man is a product of circumstances-but the circumstances are also his product. He has a unique capacity that differentiates him from all other living beings: the capacity to be aware of himself and of his circumstances, and hence to plan and to act according to his awareness.

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