

Notes from a Mad Man

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"The anti-modernist is fundamentally mad, no matter how cleverly he tries to conceal it."

Education and the New America, p. 278

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Al contemplar en las grandes ciudades esas inmensas aglomeraciones de seres humanos, que van y vienen por sus calles o se concentran en festivales y manifestaciones políticas, se incorpora en mí, obsesivamente, este pensamiento: ¿Puede hoy un hombre de veinte años formarse un proyecto de vida que tenga figura individual y que, por tanto, ~~necesitaría~~ necesitaría realizarse mediante sus esfuerzos particulares? Al intentar el despliegue de esta imagen en ~~su~~ su fantasía, uno notará que es, si no imposible, casi improbable, porque no hay a su disposición espacio en que poder alojarla y en que poder moverse según su propio dictamen? Pronto advertirá que su proyecto tropieza con el prójimo, como la vida del prójimo aprieta la suya. El desánimo le llorará, con la facilidad de adaptación propia de su edad, a renunciar no sólo a todo acto, sino hasta a todo deseo personal, y buscará la solución opuesta: imaginará para sí una vida standard, compuesta de desiderata comunes a todos y verá que para lograrla tiene que solicitarla o exigirla en colectividad con los demás. De ~~esp~~ aquí la acción en masa.

Jose Ortega y Gasset.
"Relojo Para Franceses", La
Rebelión de las Masas, 34ª edición,
Revista de Occidente, Madrid,
pp. 33-34.

Trans. ^{ed} "Unity and Diversity of
Europe," in History as a System,
W.W. Norton, New York, 1941, 1961

Notes From a Mad Man

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Education and the New America

I am an uncommitted man. I suffer from anomie, and quake in terror of the great organizations that refuse to understand. Even "a decent society, such as ours",¹ has imposed death on millions of souls similar to myself. Decent? Perhaps, but woe to that traditional ^{morality} ~~morality~~--so impossible to fulfill, yet so moving in conception. No. To it I am committed; to those ideals that I insist society shall strive to achieve; to justice, in spite of an unjust world; to the examined life, in spite of a life of insensate satiation; to goodness damned in the face of evil. It is not enough that a society "does work"²; that is no success, for a society ought to work rightly. It should be lubricated, not only by impersonal principles of social efficiency, but by a pervading sense of personal dignity, humaneness, justice and culture--in their fullest

historical richness. I am forced to deny Education and the New America for it denies that to which I am committed. But I believe that reason informs my denial.

In the new education ~~goz~~ the new America method would be its subject matter.³ The greatest intellectual good, even social purpose, is learning to learn.⁴ Therefore, I assume it is a common ground to question method; all will agree this is a reasonable course and not madness.

An argument for a New America requires historical scholarship. The historical scholarship in Education and the New America is, as the authors warn us, not modest.⁵ In significant instances lack of modesty is an euphemism for lack of method.

A minor instance is the sweeping historical judgment that "Americans have had no authentic geniuses in the field of religion..."⁶ This revelation springs full grown from the run of the argument. No source is mentioned at all. The nearest candidates, Mary Baker Eddy and Brigham Young, were dismissed by the authors as religious statesman. Historical scholarship under one of its best practitioners has concluded that Jonathan Edwards was "the child of genius" whose religious speculation was "in the manner of Augustine, Aquinas, and Pascal."⁷ Good historical method in this instance requires that Kimball and McClellan either explain why Perry

Miller is wrong or refrain from making the statement without qualification.

A similar immodesty that violates psychological method is the flat assertion that all anti-modernists are mad, even if they don't appear to be.⁸ There are two methodological problems here. First the statement could be the conclusion of empirical research. They did not present this research. The second assumes that empirical research concludes that there is a sane anti-modernist. According to the authors that doesn't matter, method must acquiesce to their all knowing a priori knowledge.

These two examples are not in key places in the argument. But a more serious lapse of historical method occurs in the discussion of "Commitment and Experience".⁹ Kimball and McClellan assert: "For the contemporary American, the possibility of experiencing the range of basic forms within the social order in his own personal life is non-existent".* The significance of this assertion for the new America requires that the old America did permit such experience. To establish such a proposition a major historical

* The following proposition could be argued logically: "In any society of three or more individuals the possibility of one of them experiencing in his personal life the range of basic forms within the social order is nonexistent." The proof is this: the society of X, Y, and Z includes the following social forms: XYZ, XY, XZ, YZ. Individual X can experience in his personal life forms XYZ, XY, and XZ; but he can not possibly experience form YZ for the is-ness of YZ requires the not-ness of x.

judgment is necessary. How did they make it?

Did it (American society) ever (permit such experience)? In a rather clear sense, it did. Consider any functional subsystem in the agrarian society--commerce, politics, military, etc. In each of these, the individual who was a full participant in the social order of his locality had a direct experience of the same basic form of social organization wherever found in the society. Relating oneself to another as a buyer-and-seller was the same form of relation whether found in the backwoods of Illinois or in the large-scale mercantile marts of Boston and New York. Similarly in politics the election, deliberations, and actions of any county court possessed the same form as its counterparts in the state capital or in Washington. Experience as a member of the local militia gave one a clear sense of the basic form of military organization wherever found in the society.¹⁰

At the end of the paragraph footnote #8 refers the curious reader to the source of this historical surdiction. There he learns:

These are many amusing tales of the pre-Civil War militia and its "Annual Muster", but probably none surpass that of Lincoln's service in the Illinois militia during the Black Hawk War. See Ida Tarbell, The Life of Abraham Lincoln, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1924) Chapter vi.¹¹

The first point is that regardless of the accuracy of the vast historical generalization being made, the historical method used deprives them of weight. Ida Tarbell is not a major biographer of Lincoln and her field is early 20th century American economic history.¹² She is not a good source even for the proposition about militia experience.

The second point is to ask whether the generalizations could stand up under good historical method. Obviously a paper such as this can not pass judgment on major problems of economic, political, and military history of 19th century America. But it can be suggested that the history of the Bank of the United States during the Jacksonian Era would be hard to explain without some differences in buyer-and-seller relationships that prompted some to want controlled currency. In the political sphere it would be difficult to explain the Civil War without political experiences that led some to find States Rights correct and some to find them wrong. Lastly, it would be very hard to explain the difficulty of regular Army officers to command the Western militias if military form was so universally understood; and it would require the overthrowing of the current military history of J.F.C. Fuller which argues that understanding the basic form of military organization prior to the Civil War unfitted the officer and soldier for the war and that Grant attained his greatness because he did not understand the old ways, yet was able to learn the new ones.¹³

The doubt is methodological. History is rich, too rich to permit facile generalizations of immense scope and minute source. The logic of the historical method would limit the scholar to the proposition that America in 1860

was more agrarian than in 1960 and that the America of 1960 is more metropolitan than in 1860. If this is a proper sense of the limits of history, then the proposition that there exists a new America, a unified social system that is fundamentally different than an old America must be doubted because it appears to transcend limits of historical method. This is the anti-modernist position: that there has not been a fundamental break in tradition.

The anti-modernist questioning has been arrived at through the examination of method on the modernist's grounds. It is time for a change in argument. Let us assume that this anti-modernist doubt is well founded, that the modernist conclusion is wrong, that there is no new America and no need for a new education. Let us also assume that the teaching community takes the anti-modernist argument as the ranting of a mad man, as Kimball and McClellan twice advised¹⁴ the new education is taught, producing commitment to a mythical system while destroying history and the traditional culture by leaving it out of the curriculum. Clearly, Kimball and McClellan have advanced a self-confirming hypothesis, that need not be true, but simply believed. Given commitment to their myth, the myth of the new America, the truth of the proposition will be created. This is essentially the condition of any proposition of a moral nature: one hypothesizes a reality that requires a certain type of action. When all act in terms of that interpretation of reality the empirical proof of the interpretation will be available.

Given this, it can be concluded that the modernist and the anti-modernist are not on different planes of discourse. One does not deny reality while the other upholds reality. Both assert different interpretations of reality. How adequate is the modernist interpretation of reality?

Their argument is we live in a social system, the new America, which is fundamentally corporate. "One's personal life is embedded"¹⁵ in these corporate structures. "Only when the brute, ineluctable is-ness of our social system is accepted, can we see what sort of ordering of the elements we started with could properly be called commitment".¹⁶ The social system exists and encompasses the individual and ineluctably demands that the conditions of its continual working be fulfilled. "In short, part of the price of being an American is being an organization man." "Autonomy is not, as Whyte would have us believe, a viable alternative. On the contrary, the very attempt to discover an alternative is a form of mental and social illness, a denial of reality."¹⁷

But what about the fact that the American of 1960 is much more deeply involved in the relations among nations than it was in 1860. This was one facet of reality that Kimball and McClellan failed to take into careful consideration. It is a denial of reality to assert that one can

just be an American. We belong first to human society. The price of being human is being autonomous, for humanity is not reflected in any corporate structure. "Only in a society which places power in impersonal rules is there a guarantee of freedom from arbitrary personal acts of injustice."¹⁸ The over-riding reality of world society is that there is no system of impersonal rules in which power is placed for the guarantee of freedom from arbitrary personal or impersonal^{*} acts of injustice. To deny the anarchic nature of world society is to deny reality.

What morality is the best for an anarchic world? The traditional, individual morality is the one basic to a system of anarchy. Since the world lacks a set of impersonal rules the individual, from within, must discipline his actions in accordance with universal ideals. The social reality requires this, it requires autonomy, for humanity is yet an unrealized ideal in an anarchic world. Humanity lies in the traditions of the world, in the accumulated wisdoms of the various races and cultures. In short, humanity lies in the humanities. The social reality requires education in that field Kimball and McClellan slight. Humanity needs "The wholly impersonal disciplines," but it needs much more the

* We must not forget that the Nazi extermination of the Jews was an impersonal policy of the Nazi State, a corporate society that did work until destroyed by outsiders. Further, we should remember that the American government did not accept the argument that the system to which the Nazi's were committed absolved them from individual responsibility for their actions.

highly personal ones. Without the former humanity would slow in its growth in power. Without the latter those absorbing individuals who direct the vast corporate structures in our opaque world where right and wrong, good and bad, truth and falsehood are so unclear would soon lack the personal discipline to inform their actions with dignity, humaneness, justice, and culture--in their fullest historical sense.

Thus spake a mad man in a mad world.

-FOOTNOTES-

- 1- Kimball and McClellan. Education and the New America. Random House, New York. 1962, p.317.
- 2- Ibid., p. 5.
- 3- Ibid., Chap. 13; pp. 306-7.
- 4- Ibid., p. 289.
- 5- Ibid., p. ix-x.
- 6- Ibid., p/ 160.
- 7- Perry Miller, Jonathan Edwards. Meridian Books, New York, 1959 copy--(1949). p. v.
- 8- Kimball and McClellan, op. cit., p. 278.
- 9- Ibid., p. 282-84.
- 10- Ibid., p. 283.
- 11- Ibid., p. 375.
- 12- see: Handlin, Schlesinger, Morison, Merk, Schlesinger, Jr., and Buck, Harvard Guide to American History. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1960 copy. 1954, p. 198, 672.
- 13- see: J.F.C. Fuller, The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant. London, 1929.
Randall and Donald, The Reconstruction. 2nd Edition, D.C. Heath and Co., Boston, 1961.
Schlesinger, Jr., Arthur M., The Age of Jackson. Brown and Co. Boston, 1950.
- 14- op. cit., pp. 278, 315.
- 15- Ibid., p. 313.
- 16- Ibid., p. 282.
- 17- Ibid., p. 315.
- 18- Ibid., p. 314.