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Freedom in a complex society

Part One: Problems

The philosophical outlook of the Great Transformation (1944) is to be expanded here beyond the brief hints on which that book closed.

Our technological civilization in its latest phase is resulting in a shift in the axis of our concern — away from the economy, towards moral and political questions, some of them entirely new.

From behind the problem-veil of the market-economy questions arise that transcend the economy and are constitutive to a technological civilization.

The self-regulating market may well have been the earliest sphere in society to carry those imprints of the machine: efficiency, automatism and adjustment. But not the economy alone, society itself seems to be reconstructed around the machine — taking its forms and objectives from the needs of the machine. For technology does not only spin us around as persons to focus our concern entirely on the external; it turns also society itself inside out. The material surroundings, projections of the machine, are not our only artificial environment; this environment comprises also a society, of which the machine itself is the texture.

At the core of the human situation is loss of freedom. The machine activated the mass as individuals in market, factory and union, directing their minds towards the institutional realities on which their

lives are dependent. Society became more mechanical and more intensely human at the same time. A climax in this polarity was reached with the transformation of matter and the simultaneous invention of mass media that attack the mind. The individual found himself trapped -- turned into a mere lump of matter that can be vaporized by the hundred million, while as a moral being he was incorporated into a human structure from which no release is possible.

The history of the past decade reflects the new perils. The threat of an other general war came from three sources, which, as far as they have a common origin, it is the Industrial Revolution: the atom, the Afro-Asian industrial awakening, and the power vacuum separating two technological giants -- each factor reinforcing the other two. Under the shadow of nuclear war and the fear inherent in a precariously based technological existence, there developed a challenge to liberty, in some great countries to the point of its utter extinction, in others to that of crippling conformity. But the violence with which the new fear undermined peace and freedom sprang from a passion for moral absolutes. The very notion of tolerance was banned. A roaring idealism was swinging a boundless technology. Pseudo-idealistic demands for value-fulfilment through war and devastation grew to a totalitarian vehemence entirely unrelated to the ethical realities, of either personal or social standards.

At the root of it all is despair. Man's inner life is at the point of extinction because he has lost hope of the individual freedom which nourished that life. Inner and outer survival require a realism that we do not yet possess. No solution is in reach without a reform of our consciousness that postulates freedom in the face of the reality



of society.

We are groping for answers.

### Part Two: The growth of a complex society

The human story of the machine is still to be written.

Robert Owen's vision encompassed its phases: that it would create a specific economy; change our physical environment; call for a reform of religion; test the limits of the value of society to man; produce a new form of human consciousness.

Implicit in this act of penetration of the future, equalled only by Dostoevsky's anticipations, was the conviction that there must be acceptance of the machine as a liberator from toil; adjustment of habits and manners so that human life could continue in a machine world; institutional changes to secure justice for the common people. Then would man discover society and its power to set a limit to reform. Yet a premature resignation was not permissible. Man could not know how far human society could be shaped and moulded. No sciences could ever tell us what was humanly possible at the boundaries. These must be ascertained in the very effort of transcending them in the selfless service of the good.

Machine-created society caused some great calamities and helped to cure others.

The market system maintained a century of peace between the great powers but infested the continents of the non-white peoples with cruel wars of conquest and subjugation. Rural servitude was replaced by the ambiguous freedom of the cash nexus. Satanic mills ground men

to mire yet eventually they released a great flow of material commodities for all. Thus were peace, freedom and livelihood wrecked, but in the long run restored through the economic effects of the machine.

Its cumulative impact on the forms of life reached to an even greater depth.

There came a time when the external world it had created left man empty, frustrated and self-alienated. Even so adjustments were possible, and technology itself helped to fill the gaps it had torn in the tissue of existence.

However, the machine did not reverse its course. Society made the powerhouse and the factory its home; the ideal was the average, interchangeable man, the spare. Science, the handmaiden of the machine, created super-explosions and mass-media. The physical fear generated by the atom was of an order different from common fear; and the congruence of mind patterns produced by the media was immediate and precise. The flash of Hiroshima lit up a human void.

The promise and postulate of Jewish-Christian religion of the absoluteness of the individual's inner freedom, freedom also from society, had yielded step by step to the complex society engendered by the machine.

### Part Three: Dilemma

Ever since man started out on existence, he owed the content of his life to the realization of truths with which he could not live as he was.

There was the fact of physical death, the finiteness of his



animal existence in time. From its acceptance sprang work, art, law and morality.

He then found himself with the knowledge that he could also lose the life he had, by denying his true self; he could lose his soul. Such living death was as manifest as death itself. The more clearly the teaching of Jesus was understood, the more awful was that knowledge. Again, man as he was could not live with it. He was, in effect, transposed into a condition of the utmost singularity. He was now burdened with a load too great to be borne and of which he yet could not rid himself.

This cross is what we mean by freedom. The hope and the duty of living in this state is the universally accepted content of the human condition familiar to the Western world. Hence the unique significance to us of that hope.

It will be realized that Robert Owen foresaw the end of the individual's freedom of society. Once again the question is how are we then going to live. That threat has been growing upon us ever since the machine, used for production, first brought mechanical compulsion to the workman. From that seed grew the roots and branches of our external existence which led to a reality as unyielding to individual volition as is the national system of powerworks that feeds the light to the lamp by which I am writing. Only by the lessons of our own history can we learn the limits of society. The liberal market utopia of the Nineteenth century, the anti-liberal socialism of the Russians have taught us some of the inevitable alternatives inherent in social existence.

We are on the horns of a dilemma: Either to ignore the

reality of society in the name of moral absolutes and helplessly accept the semblance of freedom; or to relinquish such absolutes, recognize the reality of society and ground our institutional freedoms upon it.

#### Part Four: Answers

The way to prevent freedoms from disappearing is to expand them.

Free institutions are a culture trait which it is within our jurisdiction to discard or to restore. Conformity is a shrinking of our freedom to differ. Liberal arts shall neutralize this eroding of freedom by throwing the weight of their authority behind the opinion which protects the rights of minorities, on principle. The danger in occasionally fostering the intellectual exhibitionist and the moral egotist is no more than that of creating a nuisance, while to fail to encourage, day and night, independence of character and mind brings upon the community the peril of extinction. A thousand pocket McCarthys, pursuing their several fads, each on his own, do not add up to the damage done by a single one brandishing the cat o' nine tails of conformism. Not McCarthy was responsible for McCarthism -- he merely picked up the deadly poison of conformism that the educators of the nation had concocted for medical purposes and left lying around. There were days when not a single American, and had he been the head of the state, dared to question the authority of McCarthy of pronouncing a moral death sentence against any man, guilty or innocent. An inconspicuous culture trait, the polite social habit of conforming, had dissolved the Constitution of the United States. Yet another



inconspicuous culture trait, the impolite habit of upholding one's standards, may restore it over night. To deflate the authority of averagism, a stigma should attach to the winning of its competitive prizes.

Freedom in a complex society requires an inviolable passport. The individual must be protected against undue pressure, whether from person or firm, association or corporation, custom or law.

The principle of conscientious objection involves as its sanction a hardship clause that offers a fair alternative to the exempted. A niche that would rank only as a second best with the conforming, but makes a real home for the non-conforming, shall shield us wherever possible from the implicit hazards of unavoidable compulsion.

An extension of "Habeas corpus" into industry permits the representation of the workers to attain complete unity and responsible national status, while protecting each single member against abuse of power. Courts can be relied upon to uphold inalienable rights against all comers as long as the laws are universally approved.

Habeas corpus and conscientious objection are the Anglo-Saxon devices of tolerance, that show what direction civil liberties take as they expand into the industrial field. Other cultures may produce other devices.

Tolerance shall rise from the status of a kind habit to the firm principle taming the demoniac forces in us that <sup>seek</sup> an idealistic compensation for <sup>the</sup> failure to apply to our own life and environment the precepts we preconize. All men of good will shall rally on principle to the protection of minorities. World economy shall be restored by instituting the de facto application of economic policies that ignore

differences between domestic economies. The modest culture trait of tolerance can become the polar star around which the moral virtues revolve.

The reality of society is the indissoluble consequence and burden of our life as persons in an industrial society.

We can not pursue our absolutes in search of salvation because we are flung headlong against that reality. It consists in our inevitable compelling involvement, however unwilling, in its basic constituents: the creation of power and determination of economic value. It is illusion in a complex society to imagine that we may pursue our freedom as personal salvation without reference to participation in society itself.

The spiritual forces that are ready to take over in our personal lives are dispersed to-day in a windmill fight against the reality of society. Moral courage shall reveal the inner limitations of technological progress and freedom. The search for ~~creative~~ limits is maturity.