

“Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft”: A Sociological View of the Decay of Modern Society

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Note: The text is based on an original essay by Alain de Benoist. Translated and interpreted by Dr. Tomislav Sunic (then working at the Juniata College)

Peaceful modern societies which respect the individual evolved from age-old familistic ties. The transition from band-type societies, through clan and tribal organizations, into nation-states was peaceful only when accomplished without disruption of the basic ties which link the individual to the larger society by a sense of a common history, culture and kinship. The sense of “belonging” to a nation by virtue of such shared ties promotes cooperation, altruism and respect for other members. In modern times, traditional ties have been weakened by the rise of mass societies and rapid global communication, factors which bring with them rapid social change and new philosophies which deny the significance of the sense of nationhood, and emphasize individualism and individualistic goals. The cohesion of societies has consequently been threatened, and replaced by multicultural and multi-ethnic societies and the overwhelming sense of lost identity in the mass global society in which Western man, at least, has come to conceive himself as belonging.

Sociologically, the first theorist to identify this change was the Arab scholar, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), who emphasized the tendency for mass urban societies to break down when the social solidarity characteristic of tribal and national societies disappeared. Ibn Khaldun saw dramatically the contrast between the morality of the nationalistic and ethnically unified Berbers of North Africa and the motley collation of peoples who called themselves Arabs under Arabic leadership, but did not possess the unity and sense of identity that had made the relatively small population of true Arabs who had built a widespread and Arabic-speaking Empire. Later it was Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936) who introduced this thought to modern sociology. He did so in his theory of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, 1887). This theory revealed how early tribal or national (*gemeinschaft*) societies achieved harmonious collaboration and cooperation more or less automatically due to the common culture and sense of common genetic and cultural identity in which all members were raised. This avoided major conflicts concerning basic values since all shared a common set of mores and a common sense of destiny. However, as history progressed, larger multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies began to develop, and these Tönnies described as being united by *gesellschaft* ties. These were not united by any common set of values or historical identity, and collaboration was only maintained due to the need to exchange goods and services. In short, their existence came to depend on economic relations, and as a result of the diversity of cultural values, the lack of any “family feeling,” and the emphasis on economic exchange and economic wealth, conflict over wealth and basic values was likely to disrupt the harmony of such societies at any time. In political terms, liberalism developed to eulogize the freedom of individuals from claims to national loyalty and support for national destiny, while Marxism grew out of the dissatisfaction felt by those who were less successful in achieving wealth and power, which now came to represent the primary goals of the individuals who were left at the mercy of the modern mass *gesellschaft* society. Nationalism and

any sense of loyalty to the nation as a distinct ethnic, kinship unit came to be anatomized by both liberals and Marxists.

“A specter is haunting Europe – a specter of communism” wrote Marx in the preface of The Manifesto. A century later this specter became a mere phantom, with liberalism the dominant force. Over the last several decades, liberalism used communism as a scarecrow to legitimize itself. Today, however, with the bankruptcy of communism, this mode of “negative legitimation” is no longer convincing. At last, liberalism, in the sense of the emphasis on the individual above and even against that of the nation, actually endangers the individual by undermining the stability of the society which gives him identity, values, purpose and meaning, the social, cultural and biological nexus to which he owes his very being.

Fundamentally, classical liberalism was a doctrine which, out of an abstract individual, created the pivot of its survival. In its mildest form it merely emphasized individual freedom of action, and condemned excessive bureaucratic involvement by government. But praiseworthy though its defense of individual freedom was, its claim that the ideal system is that in which there is the least possible emphasis on nationhood leads to situations which in fact endanger the freedom of the individual. In its extreme form, classical liberalism has developed into universal libertarianism, and at this point it comes close to advocating anarchy.

From the sociological standpoint, in its extreme form, modern internationalist liberalism defines itself totally in terms of the *gesellschaft* society of Tönnies. It denies the historical concept of the nation state by rejecting the notion of any common interest between individuals who traditionally shared a common heritage. In the place of nationhood it proposes to generate a new international social pattern centered on the individual's quest for optimal personal and economic interest. Within the context of extreme liberalism, only the interplay of individual interests creates a functional society – a society in which the whole is viewed only as a chance aggregate of anonymous particles. The essence of modern liberal thought is that order is believed to be able to consolidate itself by means of all-out economic competition, that is, through the battle of all against all, requiring governments to do no more than set certain essential ground rules and provide certain services which the individual alone cannot adequately provide. Indeed, modern liberalism has gone so far along this path that it is today directly opposed to the goals of classical liberalism and libertarianism in that it denies the individual any inalienable right to property, but still shares with modern liberalism and with libertarianism an antagonism toward the idea of nationhood. Shorn of the protection of a society which identifies with its members because of a shared national history and destiny, the individual is left to grasp struggle for his own survival, without the protective sense of community which his forebears enjoyed since the earliest of human history.

Decadence in modern mass multi-cultural societies begins at a moment when there is no longer any discernable meaning within society. Meaning is destroyed by raising individualism above all other values because rampant individualism encourages the anarchical proliferation of egotism at the expense of the values that were once part of the national heritage, values that give form to the concept of nationhood and the nation-state, to a state which is more than just a political entity, and which corresponds to a particular people who are conscious of sharing a common heritage for the survival of which they are prepared to make personal sacrifices.

Man evolved in cooperating groups united by common cultural and genetic ties, and it is only in

such a setting that the individual can feel truly free, and truly protected. Men cannot live happily alone and without values or any sense of identity: such a situation leads to nihilism, drug abuse, criminality and worse. With the spread of purely egotistic goals at the expense of the altruistic regard for family and nation, the individual begins to talk of his rights rather than his duties, for he no longer feels any sense of destiny, of belonging to and being a part of a greater and more enduring entity. He no longer rejoices in the secure belief that he shares in a heritage which it is part of his common duty to protect – he no longer feels that he has anything in common with those around him. In short, he feels lonely and oppressed. Since all values have become strictly personal, everything is now equal to everything; e.g., nothing equals nothing.

“A society without strong beliefs,” declared Régis Debray in his interview with J.P. Enthoven in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, (October 10, 1981), “is a society about to die.” Modern liberalism is particularly critical of nationalism. Hence, the question needs to be raised: Can modern liberal society provide strong unifying communal beliefs in view of the fact that on the one hand it views communal life as nonessential, while on the other, it remains impotent to envision any belief – unless this belief is reducible to economic conduct?

Moreover there seems to be an obvious relationship between the negation and the eclipse of the meaning and the destruction of the historical dimension of the social corpus. Modern liberals encourage “narcissism;” they live in the perpetual now. In liberal society, the individual is unable to put himself in perspective, because putting himself in perspective requires a clear and a collectively perceived consciousness of common heritage and common adherence. As Régis Debray remarks, “In the capacity of isolated subjects men can never become the subjects of action and acquire the capability of making history.” (*Critique de la raison politique*, op. cit. p. 207). In liberal societies, the suppression of the sense of meaning and identity embedded in national values leads to the dissolution of social cohesion as well as to the dissolution of group consciousness. This dissolution, in turn, culminates in the end of history.

Being the most typical representative of the ideology of equalitarianism, modern liberalism, in both its libertarian and socialist variants, appears to be the main factor in this dissolution of the ideal of nationhood. When the concept of society, from the sociological standpoint, suggests a system of simple ‘horizontal interactions,’ then this notion inevitably excludes social form. As a manifestation of solidarity, society can only be conceived in terms of shared identity – that is, in terms of historical values and cultural traditions (cf., Edgar Morin: “The communal myth gives society its national cohesion.”) By contrast, liberalism undoes nations and systematically destroys their sense of history, tradition, loyalty and value. Instead of helping man to elevate himself to the sphere of the superhuman, it divorces him from all ‘grand projects’ by declaring these projects ‘dangerous’ from the point of view of equality. No wonder, therefore, that the management of man’s individual well-being becomes his sole preoccupation. In the attempt to free man from all constraints, liberalism brings man under the yoke of other constraints which now downgrade him to the lowest level. Liberalism does not defend liberty; it destroys the independence of the individual. By eroding historical memories, liberalism extricates man from history. It proposes to ensure his means of existence, but robs him of his reason to live and deprives him of the possibility of having a destiny.

There are two ways of conceiving of man and society. The fundamental value may be placed on the individual, and when this is done the whole of mankind is conceived as the sum total of all individuals – a vast faceless proletariat – instead of as a rich fabric of diverse nations, cultures

and races. It is this conception that is inherent in liberal and socialist thought. The other view, which appears to be more compatible with man's evolutionary and socio-biological character, is when the individual is seen as enjoying a specific biological and culture legacy – a notion which recognizes the importance of kinship and nationhood. In the first instance, mankind, as a sum total of individuals, appears to be “contained” in each individual human being; that is, one becomes first a “human being,” and only then, as by accident, a member of a specific culture or a people. In the second instance, mankind comprises a complex phylogenetic and historic network, whereby the freedom of the individual is guaranteed by the protection of family by his nation, which provide him with a sense of identity and with a meaningful orientation to the entire world population. It is by virtue of their organic adherence to the society of which they are a part that men build their humanity.

As exponents of the first concept we encounter Descartes, the Encyclopaedists, and the emphasis on “rights”; nationality and society emanate from the individual, by elective choice, and are revokable at any time. As proponents of the second concept we find J.G. Herder and G.W. Leibniz, who stress the reality of cultures and ethnicity. Nationality and society are rooted in biological, cultural and historical heritage. The difference between these two concepts becomes particularly obvious when one compares how they visualize history and the structure of the real. Nationalists are proponents of holism. Nationalists see the individual as a kinsman, sustained by the people and community, which nurtures and protects him, and with which he is proud to identify. The individual's actions represent an act of participation in the life of his people, and freedom of action is very real because, sharing in the values of his associates, the individual will seldom seek to threaten the basic values of the community with which he identifies. Societies which lack this basic sense of national unity are inherently prone to suffer from repeated situations wherein the opposing values of its egotistical members conflict with each other.

Furthermore, proponents of nationhood contend that a society or a people can survive only when: a) they remain aware of their cultural and historical origins; b) when they can assemble around a mediator, be it individual, or symbolic, who is capable of reassembling their energies and catalyzing their will to have a destiny; c) when they can retain the courage to designate their enemy. None of these conditions have been realized in societies that put economic gain above all other values, and which consequently: a) dissolve historical memories; b) extinguish the sublime and eliminate subliminal ideals; c) assume that it is possible not to have enemies.

The results of the rapid change from national or tribal-oriented societies to the modern, anti-national individualism prevalent in contemporary “advanced” societies have been very well described by Cornelius Castoriadis: “Western societies are in absolute decomposition. There is no longer a vision of the whole that could permit them to determine and apply any political action . . . Western societies have practically ceased to be [nation] states . . . Simply put, they have become agglomerations of lobbies which, in a myopic manner, tear the society apart; where nobody can propose a coherent policy, and where everybody is capable of blocking an action deemed hostile to his own interests.” (*Liberation*, 16 and 21 December, 1981).

Modern liberalism has suppressed patriotic nationhood into a situation in which politics has been reduced to a “delivery service” decision-making process resembling the economic “command post,” statesmen have been reduced to serving as tools for special interest groups, and nations have become little more than markets. The heads of modern liberal states have no options but to watch their citizenry being somatized by civilizational ills such as violence, delinquency, and

drugs.

Ernst Jünger once remarked that the act of veiled violence is more terrible than open violence. (*Journal IV*, September 6, 1945). And he also noted: “Slavery can be substantially aggravated when it assumes the appearance of liberty.” The tyranny of modern liberalism creates the illusion inherent in its own principles. It proclaims itself for liberty and cries out to defend “human rights” at the moment when it oppresses the most. The dictatorship of the media and the “spiral of silence” appear to be almost as effective in depriving the citizenry of its freedom by imprisonment. In the West, there is no need to kill: suffice it to cut someone’s microphone. To kill somebody by silence is a very elegant kind of murder, which in practice yields the same dividends as a real assassination – an assassination which, in addition, leaves the assassin with good conscience. Moreover, one should not forget the importance of such a type of assassination. Rare are those who silence their opponents for fun.

Patriotic nationhood does not target the notion of “formal liberties,” as some rigorous Marxists do. Rather, its purpose is to demonstrate that “collective liberty,” i.e., the liberty of peoples to be themselves and to continue to enjoy the privilege of having a destiny, does not result from the simple addition of individual liberties. Proponents of nationhood instead contend that the “liberties” granted to individuals by liberal societies are frequently nonexistent; they represent simulacra of what real liberties should be. It does not suffice to be free to do something. Rather, what is needed is one’s ability to participate in determining the course of historical events. Societies dominated by modern liberal traditions are “permissive” only in so far as their general macrostability strips the populace of any real participation in the actual decision-making process. As the sphere in which the citizenry is permitted to “do everything” becomes larger, the sense of nationhood becomes paralyzed and loses its direction.

Liberty cannot be reduced to the sentiment that one has about it. For that matter, both the slave and the robot could equally well perceive themselves as free. The meaning of liberty is inseparable from the founding anthropology of man, an individual sharing a common history and common culture in a common community. Decadence vaporizes peoples, frequently in the gentlest of manners. This is the reason why individuals acting as individuals can only hope to flee tyranny, but cooperating actively as a nation they can often defeat tyranny.

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