

THE PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY

By

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The Decline of the West

There is mounting disorder in the Western society. The liberties Western man had won for himself after centuries of struggle were now threatened by the rising tide of barbarity. The Western liberal democracies have failed alarmingly to cope with the realities of this century. There is a deep disorder in our society which comes not from the enemies and from adversities of the human condition but from within the society. These democracies had failed to prevent a ruinous war. They have become incapacitated to wage war for rational ends and to make a peace which would be observed or could be enforced. They have some kind of incapacity to cope with reality, to govern their affairs, to defend their vital interests and to insure their survival as free and democratic states. There was no mistaking that the Western liberal democracies are a declining power in human affairs.

Before the First World War broke out, it was American policy to abstain from the role of a great power, and to limit its sphere of vital interests to the Western hemisphere and the North Pacific Ocean. Only in 1917 did the American constitutional system for dealing with foreign affairs become involved with the conduct of world affairs.

Mass opinion has acquired mounting power in the century. It has shown itself to be a dangerous master of decisions when the stakes are life and death. The movement of opinion is slower than the movement of events. It takes much longer to change many minds than to change a few. The majority will be more aware of what they have just caught up with near at hand than with what is still distant and in the future.

Democratic politicians rarely feel they can afford the luxury of telling the whole truth to the people. It is safer to be wrong before it

has become fashionable to be right. Successful democratic politicians are insecure and intimidated men. Politicians rationalize their servitude by saying that in a democracy public men are the servants of The People. This de-vitalization of the sovereign power is the malady of democratic states; derangement in the relation between the mass of the people and the government is their malady.

The government must be able to govern and the citizens must be represented in order that they shall not be oppressed. The health of the system depends upon the relationship of the two powers.

It is often assumed, but without warrant, that the opinions of The People as voters can be treated as the expression of the interests of *The People* as an historic community. The crucial problem of modern democracy arises from the fact that this assumption is false. The voters cannot be relied upon to represent *The People*. The opinions of voters in elections are not to be accepted unquestioningly as true judgments of the vital interests of the community. The point is that the voters were not – and they have never been and can never be – more than a fraction of the total population; they cannot be equal to the whole population, even to the whole living adult population. *The People* are a corporation, an entity, that is to say, which lives on while individuals come into it or go out of it.

The People as a corporate body are the true owners of the sovereign power. The people, as an aggregate of voters, have diverse, conflicting self-centered interests and opinions. A plurality of them cannot be counted upon to represent the corporate nation

The Public Interest

In ordinary circumstances voters cannot be expected to transcend their particular, localized and self-regarding opinions. The voters are most likely to suppose that whatever seems good to them must be good for the country, and good in the sight of God.

Public interest may be presumed to be what men would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, and acted disinterestedly and benevolently.

A rational man acting in the real world may be defined as one who decides where he will strike a balance between what he desires and what can be done. In the real world there are always equations which have to be adjusted between the possible and the desired.

The normal propensity of democratic governments is to please the largest number of voters. That is why governments are unable to cope with reality when elected assemblies and mass opinions become decisive in the state, when there are no statesmen to resist the inclination of the voters and there are only politicians to excite and to exploit them.

During the nineteenth century good democrats were primarily concerned with insuring representation in the assemblies and with extending the control of the assemblies over the executive power. Until the twentieth century the problem was not sharply and urgently posed. It was not the immediate problem.

A total dependence upon the assemblies and the mass electorates, has upset the balance of powers between the two functions of the state. The executive has lost both its material and its ethereal powers. The assemblies and the mass electorates have acquired the monopoly of effective powers. This is the internal revolution which has deranged the constitutional system of the liberal democratic states.

The West has failed to cope with the miseries and anxieties of the Twentieth Century. The post-revolutionary man, enfranchised and emancipated, has not turned out to be the New Man. He is the old Adam. Yet the future of democratic society has been staked on promises and predictions. The real problem is how to educate rapidly and sufficiently the ever-expanding masses that are losing contact with the tradition of Western society. The modern democracies have never been willing to pay the price of recruiting and training enough teachers, of supporting enough schools and colleges, of offering enough scholarships to give all children equal opportunities.

The best government will be the one which governs the least. The best education for democracy will be the one which trains, disciplines, and teaches the least. While education can do something to enable the individual to make a success of his own career, the instinctive rightness and righteousness of the people can be relied upon for everything else. When reason no longer represents society within the human psyche, then it becomes the instrument of appetite, desire and passion. As Bernard Shaw has it "Ability to reason accurately is as desirable as ever, since it is only by accurate

reasoning that we can calculate our actions so as to do what we intend to do – that is, to fulfill our will.”

The totalitarian tendency has always been present and logically implied in the modern revolutionary movement. If the revolution demanded it, everything – democracy, liberty, the rights of the individual – must be sacrificed to it.

Why did the full-fledged totalitarians, Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, not shrink from the means they adopted to achieve their end? The answer is that the inhuman means are justified by the superhuman end; they are the agents of history or of nature. They are the men appointed to fulfill the destiny of creation. They have been known as atheists. But in fact God was their enemy, not because they did not believe in the Deity, but because they themselves were assuming His functions and claiming His prerogatives.

The Eclipse of the Public Philosophy

The most thoroughgoing skeptic is unable, in practice to make a clean sweep – to say that since ideas have no consequences there is no such thing as a good idea or a bad one, a true idea or a false one.

Why do men make mistakes? Because an important part of human behaviour is reaction to the pictures in their heads. Human behaviour takes place in relation to a pseudo-environment – a representation, which not quite the same for any two individuals, of what they suppose to be – not what *is* – the reality of things. Men react to their ideas and images, to their pictures and notions of the world, treating these pictures as if they were the reality.

Ideas have the power to organize human behaviour. They govern the formation of his character and so imprint a lasting organization on his behaviour. There is no clear and certain boundary between character which is acquired and those more or less uneducable traits of human nature, evolved during the long ages and transmitted by inheritance. There is no doubt that a character is acquired by experience and education. Within limits that we have not measured, human nature is malleable. Quite certainly, men have acquired the ways of thinking, feeling and acting which we recognize as their ethnic, class and occupational characteristics.

The acquired culture is not transmitted in our genes, and so the issue is always in doubt. The good life in the good society, though attainable, is never attained and possessed once and for all. So what has been attained will again be lost if the wisdom of the good life in a good society is not transmitted.

That is the central and critical condition of the Western society: that the democracies are ceasing to receive the traditions of civility in which the good society, the liberal, democratic way of life at its best, originated and developed. They are cut off from the public philosophy and the political arts which are needed to govern the liberal democratic society.

Freedom of religion and of thought and of speech were achieved by denying both to the state and the established church a sovereign monopoly in the field of religion, philosophy, morals, science, learning, opinion and conscience.

The rational faculty of man was conceived as producing a common conception of law and order which possessed a universal validity. This common conception included the three values of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity of all mankind. It was a set of ideas which lived and moved in the Middle Ages. They were ideas of the natural rights of man – of liberty, political and civic, with sovereignty residing essentially in the nation, and with free communication of thoughts and opinions; of equality before the law, and the equal repatriation of public expenses among all the members of the public; of a general fraternity which tended in practice to be sadly restricted within the nation, but which could, on occasion, be extended by decree to protect all nations struggling for freedom.

There exists a body of positive principles and precepts which a good citizen cannot deny or ignore. Indeed there is such a thing as public philosophy of civility. It does not have to be discovered or invented. It is known. But it does have to be revived and renewed. The public philosophy is known as *natural law.* This philosophy is the premise of the institutions of the Western society, and they are unworkable in communities that do not adhere to it.

The founders of these institutions, which the recently enfranchised democracies have inherited, were all of them adherents of some one of the various schools of natural

law. In our times the institutions built upon the foundation of the public philosophy still stand. But they are being used by a public who are not being taught, and no longer adhere to, the philosophy. Increasingly, the people are alienated from the inner principles of their institutions.

We cannot rub out the modern age, we cannot roll back the history that has made us what we are. We cannot start again as if that there had been, no spread of rationalism and secularism, no industrial revolution, no dissolution of the old habitual order of things, no sudden increase in population. The poignant question is whether, and, if so, how modern men could make vital contact with the lost traditions of civility. Modern man will first need to be convinced that the traditions of civility were not abandoned because they became antiquated. It does, one must admit, look like that, and quite evidently the original principles and precepts do not now provide the specific rules and patterns of a way of life in the circumstances of this age. The ancient world, we may remind ourselves, was not destroyed because the traditions were false, They were submerged, neglected, lost.

The Renewal of Public Philosophy

Modern men have a low capacity to believe in the invisible, the intangible and the imponderable. The modern trouble is a low capacity to believe in precepts which restrict and restrain private interests and desire. Conviction of the need of these restraints is difficult to restore once it has been radically impaired. We must find a way to re-establish confidence in the validity of public standards. We must renew the convictions from which our political morality springs.

In the prevailing popular culture all philosophies are the instruments of some man's purpose, all truths are self-centered and self-regarding and all principles are the rationalization of some self-interest. There is no public criterion of the true and the false, of the right and the wrong, beyond that which the preponderant mass of the people at the moment are supposed to want.

There is no reason to think that this condition of mind can be changed until it can be proved to the modern skeptic man that there are certain principles which, when they have been demonstrated, only the willfully irrational can deny that there are certain obligations binding on all men who are committed to a free society, and that only the willfully subversive can reject them.

Given the practical need which is acute, and the higher generalities, which are self-evident, can we develop a positive working doctrine of the good society under modern conditions? It can be done if the ideas of the public philosophy are recovered and are re-established in the minds of men of light and leading.

In the public philosophy, an absolute right to property, or to any thing else that affects other men, cannot be entertained. To claim it is to be outside the law and the bounds of civility. When the main forms of property are intangible the difficulty of defining rights and duties is much greater. There must be rational limits put upon the acquisitive and possessive instincts, because the rising men of property little wished to hear about obligations that would limit their absolute rights.

The rights of property are a creation of the laws of the state. And since the laws can be altered there are no absolute rights of the property. Conceived in this fashion, private property can never be regarded as giving to any man an absolute title to exercise "the sole and despotic dominion" over the land and the resources of nature. The ultimate title does not lie in the owner. The title is in "mankind", in the people as a corporate unit. His ownership is a grant made by the laws to achieve not his private purposes but the common social purpose. Absolute private property inevitably produced intolerable evils. The political scientists and lawmakers had lost the tradition that property is the creation of the law for social purposes. They had no principles by which the law could deal with the abuses of property.

Between the property holders and the property less, who became the majority in many countries, there was, in consequence, no connecting bond, no consensus within the same realm of national discourse. The proletariat had the duty to respect the rights of the owners. But the owners owed no reciprocal duty to the proletariat.

The earth is the general property of all mankind. There were no obligations in which the proletariat found *their* rights. Private titles of ownership are assigned by law-making authorities to promote the grand ends of civil society. Private property is, therefore, a system of legal rights and duties. Under changing conditions the system must be kept in accord with the grand ends of civil society.

The right to speak freely is one of the necessary means to the attainment of the truth. It is only from the hope and the intention of discovering truth that freedom acquires such high public significance. If there is a dividing line between liberty and license, it is where freedom of speech is no longer respected as a procedure of the truth and becomes the unrestricted right to exploit the ignorance, and to incite the passions, of the people. If there is a better truth, it will be found when the human mind is capable of receiving it; and in the meantime we may rely on having attained such approach to truth, as is possible in our day.

An unrestricted and unregulated right to speak cannot be maintained. For in the absence of debate unrestricted utterance leads to the degradation of opinion. The more rational is overcome by the less rational, and the opinions that will prevail will be those which are held most ardently by those with most passionate will. For that reason the freedom to speak can never be maintained merely by objecting to interference with the liberty of the press, of printing, of broadcasting, of the screen. It can be maintained only by promoting debate.

In the end what men will most ardently desire is to suppress those who disagree with them and, therefore, stand in the way of the realization of their desires. Thus, once confrontation in debate is no longer necessary, the toleration of all opinions leads to intolerance. Freedom of speech, separated from its essential principle, leads through a short transitional chaos to the destruction of freedom of speech.

Human opinion universally tends in the long run to a definite form, which is the truth. Let any human being have enough information and exert enough thought upon any question, and the result be that he will arrive at a certain definite conclusion, which is the same that any other mind will reach under sufficiently favourable circumstances. There is, then, to every question a true answer, a final conclusion, to which the opinion of every man is constantly gravitating. The individual may not live to reach the truth; there is a residuum of error in every individual's opinions. No matter, it remains that there is a definite opinion which the man is, on the whole and in the long run, tending.

We find, then, that the principle of freedom of speech, like that of private property, falls within the bounds of public philosophy. It can be justified, applied regulated in a plural society only by adhering to the postulate that there is a rational order of things in which it is possible, by sincere inquiry and rational debate, to distinguish the true and the false, the right and the wrong, the good that leads to the realization of human ends and the evil which leads to destruction and to the death of civility.

The free political institutions of the Western world were conceived and established by men who believed that honest reflection on the common experiences of mankind would always cause men to come to the same ultimate conclusions. All issues could be settled by scientific investigation and by free debate if – but only if – all the investigators and the debaters adhere to the public philosophy; if, that is to say, they used the same criteria and rules of reason for arriving at the truth and for distinguishing good and evil. When the adherence of the whole body of people to the public philosophy is firm, a true community exists. When the continuity of the traditions of civility is ruptured, the community is threatened; unless the rupture is repaired, the community will break down into factional, class, racial and regional wars. For when the community is interrupted, the cultural heritage is not being transferred.

No one generation of men is capable of creating for themselves the arts and sciences of a high civilization. Men can know more than their ancestors did if they start with the knowledge of what their ancestors had already learned. They can do advanced experiments if they do not have to learn all over again to do the elementary ones.

That is why a society can be progressive only if it can conserve its traditions. From the great deeds and the high purposes of the great predecessors the new men descend, and prove themselves by becoming participants in the unfinished story.

The Two Realms

The yearning for salvation and for perfection is most surely not evil, and it is, moreover, perennial in the human soul.

The way out of the modern predicament begins where we learn to recognize the difference between the two realms. For the radical error of the modern democratic gospel is that it promises, not the good life of this world, but the perfect life heaven. The root of the error is the confusion of the two realms – that of this world where the human condition is to be born, to live, to work, to struggle and to die, and that of the transcendent world in which men's souls can be regenerate and at peace. The confusion of these two realms is an ultimate disaster. It inhabits the good life in this world. It falsifies the life of the spirit.

Saint Paul says: "The law is not made for the righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and the sinner, for unholy and profane, for man slayers."

We are free if we have the faculty of knowing what we *ought* to do and the will to do it.

In the infinite change and diversity of the actual world, our conceptual definitions are never exactly and finally the whole truth.

An encyclopedia of all that the prophets and the philosophers have taught will not tell a man clearly and definitely how to make laws, how to govern a state, how to educate his children – how, in fact, to decide the problems. Faced with practical, they need to know what choice they should make among the alternatives. But concrete guidance of this sort can be found only incidentally in the words of the prophets and the philosophers. They have not compiled systematic codes of specific rules for concrete cases. The specific rules of conduct are implicit in the inspired utterances, and have merely been deducted from it. The recorded statements of Jesus and the Apostles do not contain a comprehensive body of laws and of precepts for the ordering of men's lives.

The great multitude of men everywhere and always have demanded detailed code of conduct. They are necessary to their comfort, their convenience, and their peace of mind, and no religion with a mass following is without its manuals of casuistry.

Knowledge of the other realm is not communicable in the prosaic language of the familiar material world. For it comes from a vision of a world which is not to be perceived by our senses. A man finds himself living in two worlds and subject to two allegiances. There is the familiar world which he knows through his senses and there is world of which he has only imitations and knows only through the eyes of his mind. He is drawn between the two disparate realms of being, and the tension within them is the inexhaustible theme of human discourse. To neither can he give his whole allegiance.

In Defense of Civility

Certain general findings about the conditions of the Western world are as follows. The first is that free institutions and democracy were conceived and established by men who adhered to a public policy. Though there have been many schools in this philosophy, there are fundamental principles common to all of them: that "law is the bond of civil society", and that all men, governors and the governed, are always under, are never above, laws: that these laws can be developed and refined by rational discussion, and that the highest laws are those upon which all rational men of good will, when fully informed, will tend to agree.

The second finding is that the modern democracies have abandoned the main concepts, principles, precepts, and the general manner of thinking i.e. the public philosophy. Liberal democracy is not an intelligible form of government and cannot be made to work except by men who possess the philosophy in which liberal democracy was conceived and founded. Public philosophy can be revived. When it is applied to such central concepts as popular sovereignty, property, freedom of speech, and education, the public philosophy clarifies the problems and opens the way towards rational and acceptable solutions. The revival of the public philosophy depend on whether its principles and precepts – which were articulated before the industrial revolution, before the era of rapid technological change, and before

the rise of the mass democracies - depends on whether the old philosophy can be reworked for the modern age.

The public philosophy aims to resist and to regulate those very desires and opinions which are most popular. The concepts and principles of public philosophy have their being in the realm of immaterial entities. They cannot be experienced by our sense organs or even, strictly speaking, imagined in visual or tangible terms. Yet these essences, these abstractions, which are out of sight and out of touch, are to have and to hold man's highest loyalties.

The problem of communication is posed because in the modern world, as it is today, most men – not all men, to be sure, but most active and influential men – are in practice positivists who hold that the only world which has reality is the physical world. Only seeing is believing. Nothing is real enough to be taken seriously, nothing can be a matter of deep concern, which cannot, or at least might not, somewhere and sometime, be seen, heard, tasted, smelled, or touched.

To common sense the real is what, but only what, we believe has weight, mass, energy. The difficulty of communicating imponderable truths to common sense is not a new one. Through the ages truths that could not be materialized have been regarded as esoteric, and communicable only to an initiated few.

How can men be concerned effectively with ideas and ideals that transcend their personal experience and cannot be verified empirically in the realm of existence? In order to become concerned about, to feel committed to, transcendent objects, we have to believe in them: to believe in them they must be concrete, they must in fact or in imagination be drawn into the orbit of our sense organs.

A civilized society is founded on a public social contract. A contract is an agreement reached voluntarily, *quid pro quo*, and likely, therefore, to be observed – in any event, rightfully enforceable. In the original meaning of the word, both parties have consented – that they have thought, felt and judged the matter together. The first principle of a civilized state is that power is legitimate and duly constituted only when it is under contract. The unwritten laws of a good society, covering the domain of manners, include all things that a man should impose upon himself, from duty to good taste.

Without constitutional government, there is no freedom. For the antithesis to being free is to be at the mercy of men who can act arbitrarily

Men have been labouring with the problem of how to make concrete and real what is abstract and immaterial, to accommodate religion to the advance of science.

There are limits beyond which we cannot carry the time-honoured method of accommodation of the diversity of beliefs. Such tolerance depends upon the positive principle of accommodation. The principle calls for the effort to find agreement beneath the differences.

There was deep controversy over whether the natural laws were the commands of God or whether they were the dictates of an eternal reason, grounded on the being of God or the reason of things, was transcendent. They did agree that it was not something decided upon by certain men and then proclaimed by them. It is there objectively, not subjectively. It can be discovered. It has to be obeyed.

The critical question does not turn-out whether men do or do not believe in an imagery. It turns on whether they believe that a man is able "to experience a reality absolutely independent of himself." Behind the metaphors and the sacred images there is an independent reality that can be known and must be recognized. The concept of "truth" is something dependent upon facts largely outside human control.

It is through intellectuals that doctrines are made to operate in practical affairs. Philosophy and theology are the ultimate and decisive studies in which we engage. In them are defined the main characteristics of the images of man which will be acted upon in the arts and sciences of the epoch. The role of philosophers is rarely, no doubt, creative. But it is critical in that they have a deciding influence in determining what may be believed, how it can be believed, and what cannot be believed.

Philosophers play the same role in relation to the principles of the good society. They require the mastery of human nature in the raw by an acquired rational second nature. In the literal sense, the principles of the good society must be unpopular until they have prevailed sufficiently to alter the popular impulse. For the popular

impulses are opposed to public principles. These principles cannot be made to prevail if they are discredited – if they are dismissed as superstition, as obscurantism, as meaningless metaphysics, as reactionary, as self-seeking rationalizations.

It may be possible to alter the terms of discourse if a convincing demonstration can be made that the principles of the good society are not invented and chosen – that the conditions which must be met if there is to be a good society are there, outside our wishes, where they can be discovered by rational inquiry, and developed and adapted and refined by rational discussion.

There is a public world, sovereign above the infinite number of contradictory and competing private worlds. Without this certainty, their struggle will be unavailing. It is a practical rule, well known to experienced men, that the relation is very close between our capacity to act at all and our conviction that the action we are taking is right. This does not mean, of course, that the action *is* necessarily right. What is necessary to continuous action is that it shall be *believed* to be right. Without that belief, most men will not have the energy and will to persevere in the action.

Political ideas acquire operative force in human affairs when, as we have seen, they acquire legitimacy, when they have the title of being right which binds men's consciousness. Then they possess, as Confucian doctrine has it, "the mandate of heaven."

Abridged by Safdar Hasan Siddiqi on 19th April, 2008.