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Reflections on Contemporary History

Patrick F. Palermo

When fellow historians learn that I teach a course entitled, "The United States from 1945 to the Present," there often is a perceptible snicker in the room. For some purists in the profession, this subject is not history but comes under the heading of current affairs. It does not address itself to things long damp and dead but to events and men within the memory of most living Americans. Yet all history is simply the recording of man's previous actions. To study the past is to reflect on human beings acting and reacting in life, not death. In a sense every individual knows history. If he at all comprehends the nature of his own feelings and experiences he can grasp the meaning of other men's struggles in and for existence. At the same time, to understand the human condition of other human beings is to have a glimpse of one's self. Experience, then, of both men in the past and those of today is the basis of all history.

Imagination permits a student of the human condition to understand the richness and variety of man's experience. It is what makes history the art of life and not an intellectual abstraction of reality. Social scientists through the construction of models and quantitative techniques only measure defined factors in life and not the complexity of living it. They delineate the parts of the mass but not the totality of existence. Behaviorists view life as a maze run through by conditioned entities. They cannot even test the frustration, pain or pleasure of their controlled creatures. Electrical impulses from the brain can indicate agony or joy but cannot define it in human terms. Only a human being who has experienced such emotion can understand the feelings of his fellow man. In the humanities, history and philosophy are closely related in their concern with the quality of the human condition but there is a crucial difference. Philosophy tries to comprehend man's place in a cosmos of universals. History seeks a sympathetic understanding of man's existence in concrete social situations.

Historians are witnesses to other men's lives and in this process ultimately to their own as well. With the social scientist he must be coldly calculating in his research but unlike him the historian cannot be detached in the synthesis of his findings. If he hopes to understand other men he must know his own humanity. He has to be aware of the social conditions that surround and effect him to comprehend those that have moved men in the past. By using his imagination to relate his experience to that of the men he studies, both his knowledge of them and himself is richer and fuller. This interaction of experience is at the very core of the historical method.

In the classroom the historian's task is to make vivid a student's personal relationship with his fellow man's past experience. Unlike the American social

scientist who has become more and more concerned with quantitative analysis, the student of history may excel at the technique of his profession and yet fail to achieve excellence. Dispassionate objectivity is a virtue for those who wish to make a science of the study of man but it is a crime for those who seek to understand the fullness of any man's journey on earth. To be successful at history both the student and instructor must have a compassionate concern for those he studies. This does not mean the student, and all men are students, has prejudices for or against certain men or a particular social outlook. It does mean he has a passion for the human condition.

This is a most difficult assignment in a society which disregards its past for the uncertain promises of progress. The only use this nation has for its traditions is to turn them into nostalgia and sell them for commercial purposes. Without traditions America's vaunted pragmatism, which is the effort to have social institutions fulfill the national goals which are always moral by definition, becomes simple opportunism. Having no understanding of the past, Americans look to the future to make sense of the present. Except for the increase in production of goods our institutions have no goals. Modern bureaucracies do not solve problems but only rationalize existing activities. Even such an inherently unstable and cruel social phenomenon as welfare has become institutionalized to the point of being a normal way of life for both recipients and the governing bureaucrats.

As a result today's college students stand almost completely isolated from any hint that they and their parents, who are biological necessities for their presence, are not the first human beings on earth. With certain exceptions they have little idea of the origin of their own youth culture. It is small wonder that they feel themselves unique. Yet, despite all the talk to the contrary, they feel little sense of true social solidarity. They are only united in their sense of frustration, loneliness and general unhappiness. Having no past to guide them, they do not recognize as Hegel and Marx did that general malaise is a function of social alienation and not individual neurosis. Each student sees his condition as singular to himself and tries to solve it without help. Go into a dormitory and watch the students play oneupmanship in discussing their problems. One indication of this is the heavy enrollment in psychology and related personal sciences. I would suggest as C. Wright Mills did shortly before his death that Americans cannot hope to begin to regain their perspective until they realize that many personal difficulties have social origins.

If any of this has any validity at all then it strikes me that a course in post World War II America should not be an upper level course as it now is, but should be a survey. A student with no understanding of his own traditions or lack of them can hardly be expected to get excited about the activities of strange men from different lands and earlier times. Once a student gains a sympathetic knowledge of his own position he is much more likely to extend his interests and compassion to those who at first appeared so odd to him. His firm grasp of the origins of his own culture will be an invaluable aid to his study of alien societies.

It adds the comparative dimension which Karl Mannheim saw as so essential to the appreciation of other civilizations and the fuller comprehension of one's own.

Take, for example, the development of the United States into a disposable culture. Planned obsolescence is necessary for the rationalization of our economy. In order to plan and expand production the technocrats have to be able to predict and guide the demands of the consumer. Defense spending produces the largest and most efficient way to waste and consequently acts as the balance wheel for the whole economy. Our automobiles are programmed to last three years and cannot be fixed economically by the end of that period. Compare modern household appliances to their counterparts made fifty years ago. The great wooden cabinets of early radios have been replaced with the flimsiest of plastics. The imposing Victorian homes which told everyone that the owner was a man of solid standing in the community are torn down for development houses and apartments which begin to deteriorate before the first occupant sets foot in them.

If this were not enough to destroy our sense of stability the advent of the disposable experience will certainly finish the job. Advertising men convince the populace that even if a possession is still quite usable they do not want it anymore. They must have the new model or style. Our desires and emotions are continually manipulated to meet the demands of production. The fact that Americans wanted a piece of clothing so much six months ago and now is taught to detest it and love something else does not help our psychological stability. The ultimate disposable experience is the modern American vacation. The airlines promise people that they will take them someplace in such a way that no one will be able to tell a thing about them. They may even escape from themselves. This incipient social schizophrenia extends to many Americans' everyday existence.

More and more Americans lead fragmented lives by having their homes in the suburbs and working in the city. The husband in particular leads a split existence. Almost daily he has to play two roles which are almost diametrically opposed to each other. On the job he must be all work and devote his energies to his profession. It is especially tough for executives. He must demonstrate all the aggressiveness and command that his position demands of him. Returning home he must convert into a husband and father who exhibits the virtues of tenderness and understanding. Too often neighbors and even a man's family have no idea of the nature and pressures of his profession. On the other hand he finds it hard to appreciate his wife's difficulties in running a home and raising the children. Separated so much, husband and wife cannot be supportive of each other.

Suburban communities themselves provide little stability or support for the family. They have no traditions, no unique features, and seldom any culture. There are few ways to judge a man's contribution to his community. Except for the schools the residents take small pride in their towns. The result is isolation and lack of defined place for all members of the family. The children usually attend school far from home and they only know their classmates in their roles as students. Because of the great distances they usually do not get the opportunity to know their school chum's home life. As they get older and can hitchhike or

drive, they gather not at the corner drugstore but in the enormous air conditioned pavilions of the new shopping centers. They congregate there by the thousands on weekends.

The lack of direction of the environment leaves deep impressions on the susceptible young. The suburbs have no center and their boundaries are meaningless as one town runs into another. Unless you are going to the nearest city the road system literally leads nowhere. The highways are so congested that the driver must wait hours to get there. The volume of traffic often does not even permit the luxury of getting off the road. Everywhere it is the same. The shopper waits in lines at the supermarkets. The lines at the movies stagger the imagination. Goal-directed Americans have not adjusted to such a world but the young have adapted themselves to these conditions.

Stand in line and watch the different attitudes in the crowd. Older adults grow impatient at the inconvenience which prevents them from reaching their objective, to see the movie. At the same time the young appear to actually enjoy the long wait. Having learned not to expect direction they can quite adequately and with much ingenuity and style live an essentially aimless existence. After observing this several times one realizes that it does not matter to the youth if they ever reach the end of the line. Driving back from Washington to New York one Sunday with a group of friends we picked up a young hitchiker. The traffic was heavy and all of us except our rider became irritable over our lack of progress towards our goal. He found it great fun to be at a standstill in the middle of the New Jersey Turnpike. We finally stopped at a Howard Johnson's which was as jammed as the road. Again we were disconcerted by the delay but our new friend was overjoyed at the scene. He simply did not care how long it took to get to our destination. The trip itself was the thing for him.

College opens up a whole new experience to many students. For the first time they live in a unified society. They eat, sleep, work and play in a single community. They see their colleagues and friends performing all the functions of life and judge them on that basis. In this environment they recognize that people can have an enormous effect on each other. They begin to see the necessity of cooperation and responsibility in all phases of existence. The student becomes aware of many aspects of community life that were distant or vague to him at home. Government in the form of the school's administration operates right before his eyes. He sees decisions made and results impinging on his activities. It is little wonder that campus life had caused a rise in political consciousness.

A student's residency on campus has much more in common with life in traditional American communities than it does with his parents' existence. Until the advent of industrialized, urbanized and motorized America most people led cohesive lives in small towns. In such close-knit communities the general health of the society depended on most members carrying out not one but many obligations. Tasks were not assigned according to expertise but by confidence in an individual's character and integrity. A person won his place in a community by proving capable in all personal and social roles. A good citizen did his job well,

supported his family, boosted the town, participated in politics and involved himself in charities and church. For example, a man who was successful in his profession at the expense of all his civic duties was not considered a good citizen. In short, the health of the whole community was the responsibility of each member of society.

Although most college students do not recognize this parallelism they do demand that their communities exhibit many of the same characteristics. They urge that people stop compartmentalizing their feelings, thoughts and emotions. They believe the honest expression of oneself in every role in life is healthier both socially and individually. For this reason they ask the faculty to step out from behind their veneer of professionalism and become human beings. Some argue for greater activity in grass roots politics. It made McGovern the Presidential nominee of the Democratic party. In hunting for career positions more and more students are insisting that they have time to use their skills in direct service to the community. In response, even some large Wall Street law firms have set up legal aid departments for their young attorneys. A small but growing number of students refuse to enter the world of corporations and suburbs at all.

Students and ex-students gather at Berkeley and Harvard, on the west side of Manhattan, and in fact on the periphery of almost any campus in the nation. After graduation the student is supposed to re-enter the so called "real" world but many will no longer concede that it has any more reality than the community of the university. With a vigor approaching desperation they try to keep alive the wholeness of their college experience. The sadness lies in that they struggle without the knowledge that they are the carriers of a proud American legacy. Ironically, it is those who attack their life style that live the radically new American existence of fragmented communities. Without any understanding of the past there is no comprehension of the present.

These illustrations are not meant to defend or condemn anyone within our society. The goal has been to point out the poverty of possibilities for all men without some understanding of the human condition. This can only begin with the individual grasping the meaning of his own tradition. While the subject of history is social, the approach must always be personal. Once having appreciated the good and the bad in his own culture a man or woman can then begin to explore the fullness of past human activity. To see oneself in the context of history is not the end, it is the beginning.