

*The Present Human Condition*

When the medieval world was destroyed, Western man seemed to be headed for the final fulfillment of his keenest dreams and visions. He freed himself from the authority of a totalitarian church, the weight of traditional thought, the geographical limitations of our only half-discovered globe. He built a new science which eventually has led to the release of hitherto unheard-of productive powers and to the complete transformation of the material world. He created political systems which seemed to guarantee the free and productive development of the individual; he reduced work time to such an extent that Western man is free to enjoy hours of leisure to an extent his forefathers had hardly dreamed of.

Yet where are we today?

The danger of an all-destructive war hangs over humanity, a danger which is by no means overcome by the hesitant attempts of governments to avoid it. But even if man's political representatives have enough sanity left to avoid a war, man's condition is far from the fulfillment of the hopes of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.

Man's character has been molded by the demands of the world he has built with his own hands. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the social character of the middle class showed strong exploitative and hoarding traits. This character was determined by the desire to exploit others and to save one's own earnings to make further profit from them. In the twentieth century, man's character orientation shows considerable passivity and an identification with the values of the market. Contemporary man is certainly passive in most of his leisure time. He is the eternal consumer; he "takes in" drink, food, cigarettes, lectures, sights, books, movies; all are consumed, swallowed. The world is one great object for his appetite: a big bottle, a big apple, a big breast. Man has become the suckler, the eternally expectant—and the eternally disappointed.

Insofar as modern man is not the consumer, he is the trader. Our economic system is centered in the function of the market as determining the value of all commodities and as the regulator of each one's share in the social product. Neither force nor tradition, as in previous periods of history, nor fraud nor trickery, governs man's economic activities. He is free to produce and to sell; market day is judgment day for the success of his efforts. Not only commodities are offered and sold on the market;

labor has become a commodity, sold on the labor market under the same conditions of fair competition. But the market system has reached out further than the economic sphere of commodities and labor. Man has transformed *himself* into a commodity, and experiences his life as capital to be invested profitably; if he succeeds in this he is "successful" and his life has meaning; if not, "he is a failure." His "value" lies in his salability, not in his human qualities of love and reason nor in his artistic capacities. Hence his sense of his own value depends on extraneous factors—his success, on the judgment of others. Hence he is dependent on these others, and his security lies in conformity, in never being more than two feet away from the herd.

However, it is not only the market that determines modern man's character. Another factor, closely related to the market function, is the mode of industrial production. Enterprises become bigger and bigger; the number of people employed by these enterprises as workers or clerks grows incessantly; ownership is separated from management, and the industrial giants are governed by a professional bureaucracy interested mainly in the smooth functioning and in the expansion of their enterprise rather than in the personal greed for profit per se.

What kind of man, then, does our society need in order to function smoothly? It needs men who co-operate easily in large groups, who want to consume more and more, and whose tastes are standardized and can be easily influenced and anticipated. It needs men who feel free and independent, not subject to any authority or principle or conscience, yet are willing to be commanded, to do what is expected, to fit into the social machine without friction; men who can be guided without force, led without lead-

ers, be prompted without an aim, except the aim to be on the move, to function, to go ahead. This kind of man, modern industrialism has succeeded in producing; he is the automaton, the alienated man. He is alienated, in the sense that his actions and his own forces have become estranged from him; they stand above him and against him, and rule him rather than being ruled by him. His life forces have been transformed into things and institutions; and these things and institutions have become idols. They are experienced not as the result of man's own efforts but as something apart from him, which he worships and to which he submits. Alienated man bows down before the works of his own hands. His idols represent his own life forces in an alienated form. Man experiences himself not as the active bearer of his own forces and riches but as an impoverished "thing," dependent on other things outside of himself, into which he has projected his living substance.

Man's social feelings are projected into the state. As a citizen he is willing even to give his life for his fellow men; as a *private* individual he is governed by egotistical concern with himself. Because he has made the state the embodiment of his own social feelings, he worships it and its symbols. He projects his sense of power, wisdom, and courage into his leaders, and he worships these leaders as his idols. As a worker, clerk, or manager, modern man is alienated from his work. The worker has become an economic atom that dances to the tune of automatized management. He has no part in planning the work process, no part in its outcome; he is seldom in touch with the whole product. The manager, on the other hand, is in touch with the whole product, but he is alienated from it as something concrete—useful. His aim is to employ prof-

itably the capital invested by others; the commodity is merely the embodiment of capital, not something which, as a concrete entity, matters to him. The manager has become a bureaucrat who handles things, figures, and human beings as mere objects of his activity. Their manipulation is called concern with human relations, whereas the manager deals with the most inhuman relations, between automatons that have become abstractions.

Our consumption is equally alienated. It is determined by advertising slogans rather than by our real needs, our palates, our eyes, or our ears.

The meaninglessness and alienation of work result in a longing for complete laziness. Man hates his working life because it makes him feel a prisoner and a fraud. His ideal becomes absolute laziness—in which he does not have to make a move, where everything proceeds according to the Kodak slogan, "You press the button; we do the rest." This tendency is reinforced by the type of consumption necessary for the expansion of the inner market, leading to a principle which Huxley has very succinctly expressed in his *Brave New World*. One of the slogans which everyone is conditioned with from childhood is: "Never put off till tomorrow the fun you can have today." If I do not postpone the satisfaction of my wish (and I am conditioned only to wish for what I can get), I have no conflicts, no doubts; no decision has to be made; I am never alone with myself because I am always busy—either working or having fun. I have no need to be aware of myself as myself because I am constantly absorbed with consuming. I am a system of desires and satisfactions; I have to work in order to fulfill my desires—and these very desires are constantly stimulated and directed by the economic machine.

We claim that we pursue the aims of the Judaeo-Christian tradition: the love of God and of our neighbor. We are even told that we are going through a period of a promising religious renaissance. Nothing could be further from the truth. We use symbols belonging to a genuinely religious tradition and transform them into formulas serving the purpose of alienated man. Religion has become an empty shell; it has been transformed into a self-help device for increasing one's own powers for success. God becomes a partner in business. *The Power of Positive Thinking* is the successor of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

Love of man is a rare phenomenon too. Automatons do not love; alienated men do not care. What is praised by love experts and marriage counselors is a team relationship between two people who manipulate each other with the right techniques and whose love is essentially an egotism *à deux*—a haven from an otherwise unbearable aloneness.

What, then, can be expected from the future? If we ignore those thoughts which are only the products of our wishes, we have to admit, I am afraid, that the most likely possibility is still that the discrepancy between technical intelligence and reason will lead the world into an atomic war. The most likely outcome of such a war is the destruction of industrial civilization and the regression of the world to a primitive agrarian level. Or, if the destruction should not prove to be as thorough as many specialists in the field believe, the result will be the necessity for the victor to organize and dominate the whole world. This could happen only in a centralized state based on force, and it would make little difference whether Moscow or Washington were the seat of government.

Unfortunately, even the avoidance of war does not promise a bright future. In the development of both capitalism and communism, as we visualize them in the next fifty or a hundred years, the processes that encourage human alienation will continue. Both systems are developing into managerial societies, their inhabitants well fed, well clad, having their wishes satisfied, and not having wishes which cannot be satisfied. Men are increasingly automatons, who make machines which act like men and produce men who act like machines; their reason deteriorates while their intelligence rises, thus creating the dangerous situation of equipping man with the greatest material power without the wisdom to use it.

In spite of increasing production and comfort, man loses more and more the sense of self, feels that his life is meaningless, even though such a feeling is largely unconscious. In the nineteenth century the problem was that *God is dead*; in the twentieth century the problem is that *man is dead*. In the nineteenth century inhumanity meant cruelty; in the twentieth century it means schizoid self-alienation. The danger of the past was that men became slaves. The danger of the future is that men may become robots. True enough, robots do not rebel. But given man's nature, robots cannot live and remain sane; they become "Golems"; they will destroy their world and themselves because they will be no longer able to stand the boredom of a meaningless life.

What is the alternative to war and robotism? Most fundamentally, perhaps, the answer could be given by reversing Emerson's phrase, "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind" and saying, "Put mankind in the saddle so that they ride things." This is another way of saying that man must overcome the alienation which makes him an

impotent and irrational worshiper of idols. This means, in the psychological sphere, that he must overcome the market-oriented and passive attitudes which dominate him now, and choose a mature and productive path. He must acquire again a sense of self; he must be capable of loving and of making his work a meaningful and concrete activity. He must emerge from a materialistic orientation and arrive at a level where spiritual values—love, truth, and justice—truly become of ultimate concern to him. But any attempt to change only one section of life, the human or the spiritual, is doomed to failure. In fact, progress that takes place in only one sphere is destructive of progress in all spheres. The gospel, concerned only with spiritual salvation, led to the establishment of the Roman Catholic Church; the French Revolution, with its concern exclusively with political reform, led to Robespierre and Napoleon; socialism, inasmuch as it was concerned only with economic change, led to Stalinism.

Applying the principle of simultaneous change to all spheres of life, we must think of the economic and political changes necessary in order to overcome the psychological fact of alienation. We must retain the technological advances of large-scale machine production and automation. But we must decentralize work and the state so as to give them *human proportions*, and must permit centralization only to the point necessary for the requirements of industry. In the economic sphere, we need industrial democracy, a democratic socialism characterized by the co-management of all who work in an enterprise, in order to permit their active and responsible participation. The new forms for such participation can be found. In the political sphere, effective democracy can be established by

creating thousands of small face-to-face groups which are well informed, carry on serious discussion, and whose decisions are integrated in a new "lower house." A cultural renaissance must combine work education for the young, adult education, and a new system of popular art and secular ritual throughout the whole nation.

Just as primitive man was helpless before the natural forces, so modern man is helpless before the social and economic forces he himself has created. He worships the works of his own hands, bowing to the new idols, yet swearing by the God who commanded him to destroy all idols. Man can protect himself from the consequences of his own madness only by creating a sane society which conforms to the needs of man, needs which are rooted in the very conditions of his existence; a society in which man relates to man lovingly, in which he is rooted in bonds of brotherliness and solidarity rather than in the ties of blood and soil; a society which gives him the possibility of transcending nature by creating rather than by destroying, in which everyone gains a sense of self by experiencing himself as the subject of his powers rather than by conformity, in which a system of orientation and devotion exists without requiring him to distort reality and to worship idols.

Building such a society means taking the next step; it means the end of "humanoid" history, the phase in which man has not yet become fully human. It does not mean the "end of days," the "completion," the state of perfect harmony in which no conflicts or problems confront man. On the contrary, it is man's fate that his existence is beset by contradictions which he is called on to deal with, without ever solving them. When he has overcome the primitive state of human sacrifice, be it in the

ritualistic form of the human sacrifices of the Aztecs or in the secular form of war, when he has been able to regulate his relationship with nature reasonably instead of blindly, when things have truly become his servants rather than his idols, he will be confronted with the truly human conflicts and problems; he will have to be adventuresome, courageous, imaginative, capable of suffering and of joy, but his powers will be in the service of life, not in the service of death. The new phase of human history, if it comes to pass, will be a new beginning, not an end.