

Living in Our Society



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Contrasts and Contradictions

The following observations have nothing to do with existing social contrasts, but have regard to contradictions which continually arise in society. We all are aware of the contrasts: those that include and exclude; those between rich and poor; left and right; liberal and conservative; young and old; employers and employees; authorities and citizens; those that are included and those who feel excluded, of which the latter are alienated and feel like strangers in society, etc. In principle these contrapositions can be bridged or may even disappear altogether, although this is unlikely. However, it is a different matter with the contradictions in society. Even if we were all in agreement about most things, contradictions remain, because they are inherently present in our society.

What is meant can probably best be summarised as follows: our society is a structure of roles, not persons, and this is laid out in organisational charts that specify relationships of hierarchy and function. Authority inheres in the position, not in the individual, and social exchange is related between roles. A person becomes an object or a 'thing', not because the society is inhumane, but because the performance of a task is subordinated to the organisation's ends. This has resulted from various stages in societal development.

In our society we pursue a number of goals to which most people probably subscribe. For instance, it is generally agreed that freedom is a great asset and, therefore, each individual should be given a chance to develop his/her potential and participate in all spheres of life as much as possible. This is a central value in our culture which nobody will deny. In order to realise this value we are dependent on various means needed to create the required conditions. Without them we would not be able to develop freely in the struggle to control nature and ourselves to escape the constraints of necessity. This implies that certain reasonable minimum levels of material welfare and medical care must be guaranteed. What we usually call social security also falls within this category. Finally, it is essential that people should have the opportunity to obtain a good school education.

Since the principle of equality of all men is also one of the central values in our predominantly 'Western' culture, the means mentioned above should be available to all. This, however, implies that the economic, social, medical and educational facilities – as referred to above – will have to be made available on a large scale. The large scale production and supply of these means can only be achieved owing to a number of processes that have been set in motion since the start of the Industrial Revolution (around 1750), such as a refinement in the division of labour and the rationalisation/mechanisation of production, including every form of organised action, which, in turn, have resulted in bureaucracy and professionalism.

The foregoing processes, however, have made life increasingly more business-like and have demanded an ever greater measure of discipline on the part of people,

and this only too often led to massification and estrangement. Having started out with the best of intentions we have arrived at the very opposite of what we wanted to achieve: instead of participation we find estrangement, instead of individual development: massification.

So, what has happened that the result of all our endeavours should be so much in contradiction to our expressed intentions? What went wrong? It is clear that this cannot be ascribed to the ill will of any particular group or party. In the foregoing no room is made for a conflict of interests, class struggle, exploitation, etc., but only for good intentions and the means required to realise them. In the foregoing no room is made for a conflict of interests, class struggle, exploitation, etc., but only for good intentions and the means required to realise them. Paradoxically, the pursued of greater freedom ends up bringing forth constraint or the lack of freedom as an unwanted side effect, even without any conscious attack being made on freedom.

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Let us have another look at the stages in order to see what has happened. The problem would completely vanish if the pursuit of the desired goals were simply abandoned. In some subcultures, for example, man's freedom and individual development do not rank first in importance, but rather the glory of God and the service to one's fellow man.

Or maybe we rather should reject the means chosen. But this we don't really want, for what possible objection can there be to a (modest) level of prosperity, education and medical care? No fault can be found with factors like these. On the other hand, the problem would be solved if the requirement that our goals should apply to everybody is dropped. As soon as freedom, participation and development are pursued for a small elite only the problem disappears, because large scale production, education, etc. will no longer be necessary, with fatal consequences.

Clearly, it seems that the large scale of the provisions required put a spoke in the wheel of human freedom and individual development. This is the reason why there are people who turn against this aspect of our society. They reject the discipline and domination of big business and organisation, because when authority presents itself in the guise of organisation, it develops charms fascinating enough to convert communities of free people into totalitarian states. Best remembered from modern history are the examples of fascism in Germany (1937-1945) and of communism in Russia (1917- 1986).

F. Hoelderling once said: 'What has always made the state a hell on earth has been precisely that man has tried to make it his heaven.' It is understandable, therefore, that experiences like the examples cited above, have led in many countries to rising domestic violence, the alienation of youth and the growing challenge to the legitimacy of the system among many people, all of which have brought into question the viability of the system itself. There have been especially four changes influencing a reshaping of the social structure of the society. These are the simultaneous creation of an urban society, a national polity, a communal society, and a post-industrial world. All of them will continue to create upheavals and tensions in society, because the contradictions derive from the fact that liberal society was originally set up to promote individual ends, but has now become an interdependent economy that

must address collective goals. This implies that the society must devote itself more and more to the production of public goods at the expense of private goods and encourage and develop the public rather than the private sector. In the crucial area of equality, society must increasingly pay heed to group rights and remedy for wrongs and grievances of the past.

Thus, large scale production, medical care, education, etc. will be enlarged to such an extent that human chances for development can be secured.

What happened in the process described above can be summarised in two ways:

- as an example of a social phenomenon which is good in itself, but calls forth side effects that wholly or partially nullify the results;
- as a striking example of a case of two desirable things, both worth pursuing, but are incompatible.

What is involved here is the simultaneous pursuit of both greater individual freedom and equality. This is the well-known contradiction between freedom and equality.

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In more general terms, the contradiction presents itself as follows: when you give people a free hand, inequalities will emerge, because people are endowed with different, unequal qualities, capacities and capabilities. Very soon strong and weak groups will emerge. On the other hand, if the equality of all people is being pursued, a restraint has to be put on their freedom so as to prevent some of them from enriching themselves or increasing their power at the cost of others. This is the great dilemma confronting democracy and for which no solution has been found. A well-known example is the statement made at the time by the president of the Soviet Union (Podgorny) who said: "We are fully confident that the day is not far off when freedom and equality will also step over the Zambezi".¹ Political statements like this give rise to expectations which, as explained above, are not likely to be substantiated in reality and must inevitably

lead to a great deal of frustration. With tongue in cheek, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell once said: "From the time of Jefferson onward the doctrine that all men are equal applies only upwards, not downwards".

This and other contradictions have been given the name of social antinomies. An antinomy is the contradiction existing between two theses, both of which are obviously true. Suffice it to mention a few.

First of all, not only does a tense relationship exist between the human need for security and freedom – which is obvious enough – but also between security and equality. Because, if we are all equal we cannot expect to be regarded and treated as people who belong to a particular group, class, race, nation or region, inclusive of what this means in terms of feelings of security and safety. Freedom is an important asset and so is equality, but no less is security, which is to be rooted in one's own community.

Another well-known antinomy is the one between democracy and efficiency. In real life we find contradictions between internal and external democratic rule; in

education; between justice and the efficiency in the application of law; between private initiative and public enterprise, between the creation of an intellectual elite through education (necessary to stay abreast of scientific and technological progress) and democratic school education; between the treatment of patients as human beings and a therapy maximally relying on the effectiveness of medical technology. The series can be extended.

A more important question perhaps is what can be done about all these social contradictions that cause tensions in our society. What should our attitude be towards them? Can they be solved?

Solutions

Various thinkers – called social philosophers – adopt different attitudes regarding the antinomies pointed out by them. As far as the contradiction between freedom and equality is concerned, Alexis de Tocqueville² examined the question of how freedom can be maintained in a society tending towards ever greater equality. American society, he found, is characterised by five key features:

- the love of equality
- absence of tradition
- individualism
- tyranny of the majority
- the importance of free association.

In a state, citizens must maintain their freedom by organising themselves in societies, pressure groups, committees and parties so as to defend their particular interests. Thus, when someone asks for equality, we should ask: equality of what? Interestingly, according to de Tocqueville, democracy and socialism have nothing in common but one word: equality. But notice the difference; while democracy seeks equality in liberty, socialism seeks equality in servitude.

In other words, the protestant work ethic was an important force behind the unplanned and uncoordinated mass action that influenced the development of capitalism. The protestant believer had discovered that hard work and profit-making were signs to please God.

Karl Marx³, on the other hand, seems to underestimate the problems in a classless society; bureaucracy will disappear of its own accord, while Max Weber⁴ is more pessimistic and does not seem a way out; man is caught in his own organisational creations as in an iron cage. There is no way out, because the “protestant ethic influenced large numbers of people to engage in work, developing their own enterprises and engaging in trade and the accumulation of wealth.” In other words, the protestant work ethic was an important force behind the unplanned and uncoordinated mass action that influenced the development of capitalism. The protestant believer had discovered that hard work and profit-making were signs to please God.

The French political philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon⁵ is more optimistic and contends that it is inevitable that these contradictions and tensions occur; they belong to social life just like the tension between body and mind is characteristic of a human being. One should not, therefore, try to remove these antinomies, but one should try to live with them, try to make the best of them, because tensions may also be fruitful in that they guard us from being one-sided and direct our attention to other aspects of our existence. They also challenge our ingenuity and creativity to overcome them in the best possible way.

How to Deal with Social Antinomies

In concluding these observations I would like to express some thoughts that might help in determining what our attitude should be regarding social antinomies. It goes without saying however that such fundamental socio-philosophical problems cannot be solved in a twinkling. It will be clear that where antinomies are concerned we may be trying to reconcile the irreconcilable. For this reason we should refrain from maximising one of the two parts of the contradiction. For example, the maximisation of only freedom, only equality or only efficiency must be avoided. Rather an optimum solution should be found in which the competing goals may be combined in the best possible way.

However, it frequently happens that the radical rooting out of abuses will call forth other abuses, equally unacceptable, as usually happens after a revolution, both belligerent and peaceful.

For this reason polarisation as a political tactics is pointless where antinomies are concerned. It is not always a matter of doing away with abuses and replacing them with more desirable conditions. Unfortunately, it is not that easy. Although sometimes this might be the case as, for instance, when a glaring injustice must be contested. In such a case polarisation will be a useful method. However, it frequently happens that the radical rooting out of abuses will call forth other abuses, equally unacceptable, as usually

happens after a revolution, both belligerent and peaceful.

When some people rightly caution against undesirable social developments – as several leading businessmen have pointed out the adverse aspects of growing government interference due to regulation and bureaucracy – the conclusion should not automatically be drawn that therefore these phenomena are totally objectionable. The opposite developments may be equally undesirable. For this reason every individual case should be looked into to determine whether we are dealing with an antinomy or not. People who caution against real dangers in society, but neglect the equally real dangers of the reverse development seem to ignore this aspect of social reality.

Finally, and this may afford some consolation after the somewhat disillusioning observations above, it is fortunately not so that all our social aspirations are of a mutually contradictory nature. Human solidarity, mutual love, respect and affection do not fall in this cadre. Perhaps it is these human qualities that will help us to live with antinomies in our society.

NOTES

- 1 EP Herald, March 28, 1972.
- 2 De Tocqueville (2000) Democracy in America. Harvey Mansfield and Delta Winthrop, ed. Chicago University Press.
- 3 Marx (1911) A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. Chicago: Charles H Kerr & Company.
- 4 Webber (1930) The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. English translation by Talcott Parsons, Norton Critical Editions, 2009.
- 5 Proudhon (1846) The System of Economic Contradictions or the Philosophy of Poverty. Electronic Text Center: University of Virginia Library. (Original: *Système des contradictions économiques ou philosophie de la misère.*)