

Thomas More Institute
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healing and creating in history

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The topic assigned me reads: healing and creating in history.

What precisely it means or even what it might mean, does not seem to be obvious at first glance. An initial clarification appears to be in order.

We have to do with healing and creating in history. But no particular kind of history is specified, and so we are not confined to religious or cultural or social or political or economic or technological history. Again no people or country is mentioned, neither Babylonians nor Egyptians, Greeks nor Romans, Asians nor Africans, Europeans nor Americans. It would seem, then, that we have to do with healing and creating in human affairs. For human affairs are the stuff of history, and they merit the attention of the historian when they are taken in a relatively large context and prove their significance by their relatively durable effects.

However, if 'history' is taken to mean human affairs, we still need a clue to the meaning of our other terms, healing and creating. So we turn to Lord Acton, one time Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, inaugurator of the Cambridge Modern History, and author of the celebrated phrase:

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." He went on to add that "Great men are almost always bad men....," and he explained himself perhaps most succinctly in one of his letters to Mary Gladstone:

By all means we should think well until forced to think ill of people. But we must be prepared for the compulsion; and the experience of history teaches that the uncounted majority of those who get a place in its pages are bad. We have to deal chiefly, in life, with people who have no place in history, and escape the temptations that are on the road to it. But most assuredly, now as heretofore, the Men of the Time are, in most cases, unprincipled, and act from motives of interest, of passion, of prejudice cherished and unchecked, of selfish hope or unworthy fear.¹

Such was Lord Acton's estimate of the morals of men of authority or of influence in human affairs.

Not only had the same estimate been expressed by others, by Tacitus, by Burckhardt, by Henry Adams, but even more revealingly there was the common opinion of historians and philosophers that the ordinary moral code was not to be applied to men in power.

The authentic interpreter of Machiavelli (for Acton) is the whole of later history.... He (Acton) proceeded to demonstrate this thesis by quotations

from kings, popes, statesmen, divines, philosophers, and historians. The dossier included the most important schools and names in modern thought....

What they had in common, and the characteristic mark of modernity, was the idea that 'public life is not an affair of morality, that there is no available rule of right and wrong, that the code shifts with the longitude, that the wisdom which governs the event is superior to our own.'²

There exists, then, a weighty body of opinion to the effect that the trouble with human affairs is wickedness. However virtuous the average citizen, however blameless the private lives of public men, none the less public life can be respected only if it is exempted from ordinary moral standards.

It remains that a diverging estimate should not be overlooked, and it happens that on this matter Lord Russell and Sir Karl Popper disagree. Sir Karl credits Lord Russell with the view that men today are very intelligent: they make jet-planes, computers, nuclear bombs; but the trouble, according to Lord Russell, is that besides being intelligent they also are wicked. In contrast, Sir Karl finds people today to be extremely moral, full of the milk of human kindness, brimful with moral indignation, vigorously protesting every evil that comes to their attention; but the trouble, according to Sir Karl, is that besides being highly moral they also are stupid.³

Of course, these two views are not mutually exclusive. The trouble with human affairs may be attributed either to the fact that many people are less than honest or to the fact that many are not very bright. Nor are the two views contradictory, ~~and mutually exclusive~~. Both can be true simultaneously. Nor need the two factors operate independently. They can be complementary and reinforce each other. For the less astute are a temptation to the dishonest who feel that they can fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time. Conversely, the traps set the obtuse by the wicked bring about more widespread and deeper folly than the obtuse could dream up for themselves.

But we are anticipating. Before going further, on the history of human affairs, let us first say something about the creating and healing that may be thought to bring some remedy.

The creating in question is not creating out of nothing. Such creating is the divine prerogative. Man's creating is of a different order. Actually, it does not bring something out of nothing, but it seems to do so. William James, the American psychologist and philosopher, has described three stages in the career of a theory. First, "... it is attacked as absurd; then it is admitted to be true, but obvious and insignificant; finally it is seen to be so important that its adversaries claim that they themselves discovered it."⁴ Such a theory

is creative.

Let me illustrate this need for human creating from the contemporary economic situation. Last year there was published a thick volume by Richard Barnet and Ronald Müller with the title, Global Reach, and the subtitle, The Power of the Multinational Corporations. Its thirteen chapters fell into three parts. The first set forth the aims of the multinational corporations: they propose to run the world, for they can do the job and our little national governments are not equipped to do so. The second set of chapters delineated what the multinational corporations were doing to the under-developed countries: they have been making them more hopelessly worse off than otherwise they would be. The third set finally asked what these corporations, which in the main are American, have been doing to the United States; the answer is that they are treating the States in the same way they are treating the under-developed countries and, in the long run, the effects there will be the same as in the rest of the world.

Now if the multinational corporations are generating worldwide disaster, why are they permitted to do it? The trouble is that there is nothing really new about multinational corporations. They aim at maximizing profit, and that has been the aim of economic enterprise since the mercantile, the industrial, the financial revolutions ever more fully and thoroughly took charge of our affairs. The alternative to making a profit is bankruptcy. The alternative to maximizing profit is inefficiency.⁵ All that the multinational corporation

does is maximize profit not in some town or city, not in some region or country, but on the global scale. It buys labor and materials in the countries where they are cheapest. Its credit is unimpeachable and so it can secure all the money it wants from whatever banks or money markets are in a position to create it. →

→ Its marketing facilities are a global network and to compete one would have first to build up a global network of one's own. The multinational corporation is a going concern. It is ever growing and expanding. It is built on the very principles that slowly but surely have been moulding our technology and our economics, our society and our culture, our ideals and our practice for centuries. It remains that the long accepted principles are inadequate. They suffer from radical oversights. Their rigorous application on a global scale, according to Barnett and Müller, head us for disaster. But as the authors also confess: "The new system needed for our collective survival does not exist."⁶ When survival requires a system that does not exist, then the need for creating is manifest.

While it can take a series of disasters to convince people of the need for creating, still the long, hard, up-hill climb is the creative process itself. In retrospect this process may appear as a grand strategy that unfolds in an orderly and cumulative series of steps. But any retrospect has the advantage of knowing the answers. The creative task

is to find the answers. It is a matter of insight, not of one insight but of many, not of isolated insights but of insights that coalesce, that complement and correct one another, that influence policies and programs, that reveal their short-comings in their concrete results, that give rise to further correcting insights, corrected policies, corrected programs, that gradually accumulate into the all-round, balanced, smoothly functioning system that from the start was needed but at the start was not yet known.

This creative process is nothing mysterious. It has been described by Jane Jacobs in her The Economy of Cities,⁷ as repeatedly finding new uses for existing resources. It has been set forth in the grand style by Arnold Toynbee under the rubric of "Challenge and Response" in his A Study of History, where the flow of fresh insights takes its rise from a creative minority, and the success of their implementation wins the devoted allegiance of the rank and file.⁸

I have spoken of insights, and I had best add what I do not mean. An insight is not just a slogan, and an ongoing accumulation of insights is not just an advertising campaign. A creative process is a learning process. It is learning what hitherto was not known. It is just the opposite of the mental coma induced by the fables and jingles that unceasingly interrupt television programs in our native land and even in the great republic to the south of us.

Again, insights are one thing, and concepts are quite another. Concepts are ambiguous. They may be heuristic, but then they merely point to unspecified possibilities, as highly desirable as justice, liberty, equality, peace -- but still just empty gestures that fail to reveal how the possibilities might be realized and what the realization concretely would entail. Again, concepts may be specific, but then they are definite, rounded off, finished, abstract. Like textbooks on moral theology they can name all the evils to be avoided but get no further than unhelpful platitudes on the good to be achieved. For the good is never an abstraction. Always it is concrete. The whole point to the process of cumulative insight is that each insight regards the concrete while the cumulative process heads towards an ever fuller and more adequate view. Add abstraction to abstraction and one never reaches more than a heap of abstractions. But add insight to insight and one moves to mastery of all the eventualities and complications of a concrete situation.

The creative process culminates in system, but the system is only system on the move. It never reaches static system that comes into existence and remains forever after. So it is that, when the flow of fresh insights dries up, when challenges continue and responses fail to emerge, then the creative minority becomes the merely dominant minority and the eagerness of the rank and file, that exulted in success, turns into the sullenness of an internal proletariat frustrated and disgusted by the discovery that a country in which, more and more, everything had worked has become a country in which,

more and more, nothing works. Such is the disenchantment that, to use Toynbee's terms, brings to an end the genesis of a civilization and introduces first its breakdowns and eventually its disintegration.

But, one may ask, why does the flow of fresh insights dry up? Why, if challenges continue, do responses fail? Why does a minority that was creative cease to be creative and become merely dominant?

There are many intermediate answers that correspond to the many and varied circumstances under which civilizations break down. But there is one ultimate answer that rests on the intrinsic limitations of insight itself. For insights can be implemented only if people have open minds. Problems can be manifest. Insights that solve them may be available. But the insights will not be grasped and implemented by biased minds. There is the bias of the neurotic fertile in evasions of the insight his analyst sees he needs. There is the bias of the individual egoist whose interest is confined to the insights that would enable him to exploit each new situation to his own personal advantage. There is the bias of group egoism blind to the fact that the group no longer fulfils its once useful function and that it is merely clinging to power by all the manoeuvres that in one way or another block development and impede progress. There is finally the general bias of all 'good' men of common sense, cherishing the illusion that their single talent, common sense, is omniscient, insisting on procedures that no longer work, convinced that

the only way to do things is to muddle through, and spurning as idle theorizing and empty verbiage any rational account of what has to be done.⁹

Not only is there this fourfold exclusion of fresh insights by the neurotic, by the bias of individual and, worse, of group egoism, and by the illusory omniscience of common sense. There also is the distorting effect of all such bias on the whole process of growth. Growth, progress, is a matter of situations yielding insights, insights yielding policies and projects, policies and projects transforming the initial situation, and the transformed situation giving rise to further insights that correct and complement the deficiencies of previous insights. So the wheel of progress moves forward through the successive transformations of an initial situation in which are gathered coherently and cumulatively all the insights that occurred along the way. But this wheel of progress becomes a wheel of decline when the process is distorted by bias. Increasingly the situation becomes, not the cumulative product of coherent and complementary insights, but the dump in which are heaped up the amorphous and incompatible products of all the biases of self-centered and short-sighted individuals and groups. Finally, the more the objective situation becomes a mere dump, the less is there any possibility of human intelligence gathering from the situation anything more than a lengthy catalogue of the aberrations and the follies of the past. As a diagnosis of terminal cancer denies any prospect of health restored, so a social dump is the end of fruitful

insight and of the cumulative development it can generate.

I have spoken of creating in history and of its nemesis. But my topic also calls for a few words on healing. In fact, the genesis and breakdown of civilization occupy only the first six of the ten volumes Toynbee devoted to his Study of History. In the last four there emerges a new factor, for out of the frustration and disgust of the internal proletariat there come the world religions and a new style of human development.

For human development is of two quite different kinds. There is development from below upwards, from experience to growing understanding, from growing understanding to balanced judgement, from balanced judgement to fruitful courses of action, and from fruitful courses of action to the new situations that call forth further understanding, profounder judgement, richer courses of action.

But there also is development from above downwards. There is the transformation of falling in love: the domestic love of the family; the human love of one's tribe, one's city, one's country, mankind; the divine love that orientates man in his cosmos and expresses itself in his worship. Where hatred only sees evil, love reveals values. At once it commands commitment and joyfully carries it out, no matter what the sacrifice involved. Where hatred reinforces bias, love dissolves it, whether it be the bias of unconscious

motivation, the bias of individual or group egoism, or the bias of omniscient, short-sighted common sense. Where hatred plods around in ever narrower vicious circles, love breaks the bonds of psychological and social determinisms with the conviction of faith and the power of hope.

What I have attributed to love and denied to hatred, must also be denied to any ambiguous and so deceptive mixture of love and hatred. If in no other way at least from experience we have learnt that professions of zeal for the eternal salvation of souls do not make the persecution of heretics a means for the reconciliation of heretics. On the contrary, persecution leads to ongoing enmity and in the limit to wars of religion. In like manner wars of religion have not vindicated religion; they have given ^{color} to a secularism that in the English-speaking world regards revealed religion as a merely private affair and in continental Europe thinks it an evil.

Again, while secularism has succeeded in making religion a marginal factor in human affairs, it has not succeeded in inventing a vaccine or providing some other antidote for hatred. For secularism is a philosophy and, no less than religion, it may lay claim to absolutes of its own. In their name hatred can shift from the religious group to the social class. So the professions of tolerance of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment did not save from the guillotine the feudal nobility of France, and the Marxist march of history in Russia has attended to the liquidation not merely of the bourgeoisie but also of the Romanovs, ^{the landowners,} and the kulaks.¹⁰

As healing can have no truck with hatred, so too it can have no truck with materialism. For the healer is essentially a reformer: first and foremost he counts on what is best in man. But the materialist is condemned by his own principles to be no more than a manipulator. He will apply to human beings the stick-and-carrot treatment that the Harvard behaviorist, B. F. Skinner, advocates under the name of reinforcement. He will maintain with Marx that cultural attitudes are the by-product of material conditions and so he will bestow upon those subjected to communist power the salutary conditions of a closed frontier, clear and firm indoctrination, controlled media of information, a vigilant secret police, and the terrifying threat of the labor camps. He may even accept the extravagant implication of Marxist moral relativism and contend that those in free countries should migrate to the slums and become immersed in proletarian living conditions, for it is only such material conditions that will bring about right thinking in their minds and right feeling in their hearts.¹¹

Healing then has to be disassociated from the itch to manipulate, to which the reforming materialist is confined by his own principles. It has to be disassociated from religious hatred of heretical sects and from philosophic hatred of social classes. But besides these requirements, intrinsic to the nature of healing, there is the extrinsic requirement of a concomitant creative process. For just as the creative process, when unaccompanied by healing, is distorted and corrupted by bias, so too the healing process,

when unaccompanied by creating, is a soul without a body. Christianity developed and spread within the ancient empire of Rome. It possessed the spiritual power to heal what was unsound in that imperial domain. But it was unaccompanied by its natural complement of creating, for a single development has two vectors, one from below upwards, creating, the other from above downwards, healing. So when the Roman empire decayed and disintegrated, the church indeed lived on. But it lived on, not in a civilized world, but in a dark and barbarous age in which, as a contemporary reported, men devoured one another as fishes in the sea.

If we are to escape a similar fate, we must demand that two requirements are met. The first regards economic theorists; the second regards moral theorists. From economic theorists we have to demand, along with as many other types of analysis as they please, a new and specific type that reveals how moral precepts have both a basis in economic process and so an effective application to it. From moral theorists we have to demand, along with their other various forms of wisdom and prudence, specifically economic precepts that arise out of economic process itself and promote its proper functioning.

To put the same points in negative terms, when physicists can think on the basis of indeterminacy, economists can think on the basis of freedom and acknowledge the relevance of morality. Again, when the system that is needed for our collective survival does not exist, then it is futile to

excoriate what does exist while blissfully ignoring the task of constructing a technically viable economic system that can be put in its place.¹²

Is my proposal utopian? It asks merely for creativity, for an interdisciplinary theory that at first will be denounced as absurd, then will be admitted to be true but obvious and insignificant, and perhaps finally be regarded as so important that its adversaries will claim that they themselves discovered it.

Notes

- 1) Gertrude Himmelfarb, Victorian Minds, New York: Knopf, 1968. P. 184.
- 2) Ibid., p. 185.
- 3) Karl Popper, Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge, New York: Harper Torch Books, 1968. p. 365.
- 4) William James, Pragmatism, London: Longmans, 1912. p. 198. Quoted by Louis Mink, Mind, History, and Dialectic: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood, Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press, 1969. p. 255.
- 5) Where, of course, inefficiency means by definition the failure to maximize profit.
- 6) Richard Barnett and Ronald Müller, Global Reach: The Power of the Multinational Corporations, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974, p. 385.
- 7) Jane Jacobs, The Economy of Cities, New York: Random House (Vintage Books), 1970.
- 8) For an incomplete list of the critiques of Toynbee's Study of History, see that work, vol. XII: Reconsiderations, London/New York: Oxford University Press, 1961. pp. 680-690. With Reconsiderations available, the critics are far less impressive.
- 9) I have written at greater length on bias in Insight, pp. 191-206; 218-242; 627-633; 688-693. In the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, bias is treated obliquely under the name of alienation.
- 10) For background see the penetrating analysis by Christopher Dawson, "Karl Marx and the Dialectic of History," The Dynamics of World History, edited by John J. Mulloy, London: Sheed and Ward, 1957, pp. 354-365. Originally in Dawson's Religion and the Modern State, 1935.
- 11) For Marx morality is relative to social class. As Dawson trenchantly put it: "Hence it would seem that the only real immorality is to betray the interests of one's own class, and that a man like Karl Marx himself, or F. Engels who serves the interests of another class even if it be the class of the future, is no social hero, but an apostate

and a traitor. He has become a bad bourgeois but he can never become a good proletarian unless he is economically and sociologically absorbed into the proletariat." Ibid., p. 362 f.

- 12) The ineffectualness of moral precepts that are not technically specific has been noted by Christian Duquoc, O.P., Ambiguïté des théologies de la sécularisation: essai critique, Gembloux: Duculot, 1972. Though the problematic is quite different, remarks on the limitations of the Pastoral Constitution, Gaudium et Spes, 103 ff., 113 ff., have a certain relevance. See also p. 67 for a parallel criticism of The Secular City by Harvey Cox.