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ALIENATION AND ANOMIE

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# MAN IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: ALIENATION AND ANOMIE \*

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THE CENTRAL THEME of the topic here developed involves the philosophical prospects of the day, or general trends in social thought and ideologies, the human condition of man including the question of man as a historical being, and something of the conditions of human life in the world today. These general questions lead us to the persistent and pervasive problem that the modern world confronts, the problem of widespread alienation, its frustrations and anxieties, together with the anomie of the present generation — its tendency to reject the authority of all institutions and value systems of the past. Finally, I shall consider the pathways of the mind and spirit, creativity and social goodwill, as they relate to man's place in the world.

## TWO TRENDS IN PRESENT-DAY THOUGHT

One may distinguish two radically different trends or schools of thought in the world today. These two modes of thinking contradict each other in many ways, though also agreeing in some. Taken together they constitute a basic dialectic or dialog in the contemporary intellectual world. They are:

1. Naturalist-existentialist-relativist-behaviorist.
2. Normative-idealist-neoThomist-platonic-neoKantian-spiritualist (sometimes also existentialist).

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The first of these two trends reveals a central theory of the nature and reality of knowledge connected with a naturalistic concept of being which is usually non eleatic and skeptical of the humanity of man.

The second trend in thought today is that of the normative idealist. In some cases it tends to be neo-Thomist, attempting a modern reinterpretation of classical religious or theological thought. Sometimes it is more platonic, neo-Kantian, or spiritual in the broad humanistic sense. Under this heading may be grouped a wide range of differing trends which have the common denominator of searching for a norm and asserting the fundamental reality of the ideal.

Relativist and existentialist theories are central to our knowledge of the physical world today, as well as to knowledge of the human or social world. They tend to reject the possibility of universal standards or norms as merely subjective. Unhappily, in the popular view relativism and existentialism have often come to mean to the present generation that ideas are nothing more than opinions. Since normative principles are all subjective in this way of thinking, nothing can be either good or bad from an ethical standpoint; it can only have a certain relationship to a situation. Hence, we have what is called the situational ethic.

In accordance with this pattern of thinking it is easy to fall into the trap that no legitimate basis for authority exists in society because there is no demonstrable principle upon which authority can rest. The next stage through which much of the popular thinking of today goes, though it does not proceed logically from the preceding stage, is to assume that because no normative principle for authority can be demonstrated, all authority is evil. It is bad, the reasoning goes, because it limits the essential freedom that makes one person's opinion as good as another person's opinion, just as true as another person's opinion.

This stage brings us to the essential anarchism of the anti-establishment popular psychology of today. As already suggested, this anarchism does not necessarily follow from a commitment to the existentialist and relativist point of view. In general, one finds that most scientists and careful students who accept as scientifically necessary this view of the truth of relativism and of existence as truth, still believe that is possible within this existentialist-relativist context to define norms or standards.

At this point it may be appropriate to point out that the problem of norms raises the question of the significance of historical tradition and the meaning of history. One finds today, specially among the youthful generation —the generation I am in contact with as a university professor— that the existentialist relativist behaviorist point of view leads to a rejection of the significance

or the meaning of historical experience. It is not necessarily the case that the second of two viewpoints mentioned, the normative one, should be historical. Norms may be arrived at, in various ways, upon the basis of a philosophy of man's nature, for example, or upon theological bases. But some historical thought is commonly found among those thinkers who embrace the normative point of view.

#### TWO ATTITUDES TOWARD PHILOSOPHY: ANTONIO CASO

Another approach to contemporary thinking about the relationship of man to society appears in the thought of the Mexican philosopher, Antonio Caso. In one of his brilliant essays Caso distinguished these two "attitudes toward philosophy."

#### DOS ACTITUDES HACIA LA FILOSOFÍA

1. HEROICA: inventivo, entusiasmado, intrépido, problemático. PLATON, PLOTINO, AGUSTIN, BLAS PASCAL, HENRI BERGSON, MAX SCHELER.
2. DISCRETO: objetivo, sereno, lógico, débil. ARISTOTELES, CLEMENTE DE ALEJANDRIA, RENE DESCARTES, MANUEL KANT, EDMUNDO HUSSERL.

The "Heroic" thought, according to Caso, is concerned with the solution of problems. In this category he places such great philosophers as Plato, Plotinus, Saint Augustine, Blas Pascal and Henri Bergson of France, and Max Scheler of Germany. Today, we ascribe this kind of thinking to the activist — to one who believes that philosophy is true only as it is expressed in action and that it inevitably calls for action. In the literary tradition of the United States, Henry Thoreau was such a philosopher-activist who believed that the only true philosophy was the philosophy that was lived by. Henry Thoreau lived his philosophy, going to prison in passive resistance against the poll tax, because it supported a government which tolerated slavery. He was visited in prison by his good friend the poet, essayist, philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who is said to have asked Thoreau, "Henry, why are you here?" Thoreau replied: "Waldo, why are you not here?"<sup>1</sup> This reaction of Thoreau is that of the activist: it is the *heroica* of which Caso speaks.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in the "Introduction" by Joseph L. King to Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (New York: Macmillan, 1929). p. xv.

In the second of these attitudes toward philosophy, the *discreto*, or "discreet", Caso seems to have been describing himself. Certainly, the term would well apply in general to Antonio Caso's own attitude toward philosophy. But it could not apply uniformly, for at one point Caso left the university in protest against its educational philosophy. The "discreet" philosopher is objective, *sereno*, *lógico*, perhaps *débil*, humble in his weakness. In this class Caso places such great figures as Aristotle, Clement of Alexandria, René Descartes of France, Emmanuel Kant of Germany and Edmundo Husserl, the 20th century existentialist philosopher of Germany.

The *discreto* today is the scientific thinker, detached in his thought. Like Emmanuel Kant, he may insist upon what Kant described as the "categorical imperative" that requires the individual to act in accordance with values and norms that cannot be demonstrated empirically or logically. Some of the most significant trends in thought today are of this general character. They are spiritual in some sense, insisting upon the philosophical possibility of establishing value systems, rather than upon a rule or principle that can be demonstrated empirically or logically, even though they rest chiefly upon what man as man believes to be true.

Obviously, these two classifications of thought, as outlined by Antonio Caso, do not describe the intellectual problem of today from all points of view. They are merely two basic ways of analysis which have a fundamental relevance to understanding the questioning going on in the world today. They are forms of analysis concerned with the nature of truth and its relationship to action.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE BASIC SUBSTANTIVE ISSUE

But if one turns from these questions of the form of thought to the questions of substance, that is to say to questions of the social order, social change, social movements and social behavior, other ways of analyzing the contemporary scene appear. In this author's view the most basic issue may be stated in the following simple form:

<sup>2</sup> "Heroísmo filosófico", in *Ensayos críticos y polémicos* (México: Cultura, 1922), pp. 67-68. Examples of philosophers were given in *Historia y antología del pensamiento filosófico*. (México: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1926), pp. 8-13. See also the comment in John H. Haddox, *Antonio Caso* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), p. 14.

1. IS THE GOOD LIFE ACHIEVED THROUGH THE GOOD SOCIETY (SOCIALISM)?
2. OR IS THE GOOD SOCIETY ACHIEVED THROUGH THE GOOD INDIVIDUAL?

Ideologies and political leaders today tend to embrace and to act upon the basis of one or the other of these two assumptions. The difference between the two explains to a considerable degree the meaning of the increasingly polarized political activity.

The trend toward polarized ideologies is so noticeable that many writers and thinkers today have pointed the finger particularly at this central question as the great intellectual problem that society faces today in its rapid social change. In simple terms the issue is that of the relationship of man and his humanity to society. Obviously, the first point of view stated above is the one most closely identified with the various varieties of socialist thought. This does not necessarily mean thought that derives from Karl Marx. Rather, embraces all social theories which assume that the structure of society produces the good life, as against theories that propose the human person as the essential element and argue that by improving the life of human beings one creates the good society.

This first proposition assumes either that the will of God or the natural law of the Universe, or possibly some combination of both of these as in the pantheism of Spinoza, is best expressed in these abstract structures of society. A famous example of this pantheist or quasi pantheist view appears in the ambivalent phrase in the United States Declaration of Independence which speaks of national independence as a right under "the laws of nature and nature's God." This first point of view assumes that although man is a child of God and/or a child of nature, he achieves his human character from the society or the culture of which he is a part.

This is Marxist doctrine, but it is also theory of Thomas Hobbes, (1588-1679) of Nicole Machiavelli (1469-1527), and of many other writers on the problem of a political and social order. Their view is that man is civilized by law and institutions — by virtue of a kind of law of necessity. This is the view of many, but not all, revolutionaries today who say that the only hope for mankind is a complete revolution in the structure of society. But it is also the point of view of many advocates of gradual and peaceful change.

The second point of view assumes, and it has many great exponents, that man either as a child of God having something of God's nature in him, or as a child of nature, has in him the reason, the good sense, and the good will to love his fellowman and to seek his own improvement in the companionship

of others. We may venture to say there is no greater common link between the tradition of Christian thought and the tradition of democratic thought than this basic concept that democracy rests upon the love of man for mankind. An eloquent expression of this idea appears in the writing of Esteban Echeverría of Argentina, one of the famous "Generation of 1837", in his *Dogma Socialista*. But the idea is by no means original with Echeverría and his group of the Association of May. It was expressed by Jean Jacques Rousseau and has roots in the answer of Jesus to the question of the Pharisee, "What is the great commandment?" His reply was: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and your neighbor as yourself." This Christian commandment finds secular expression in the democratic point of view that the good society is built on the love of man for mankind.

Antonio Caso, and many others, have pointed out that St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, in different ways, effected a kind of reconciliation of these two divergent points of view, in the sense that neither was true to the exclusion of the other. This "scholastic" view may well be the best and most fundamental approach to the theory of the contemporary revolutionary movements which assume that a revolutionary change in social structure is essential before one can begin to achieve justice and the good life. Indeed, when social theory is considered in terms of these two alternatives here presented, the truth becomes obvious that really great minds in our intellectual tradition have always pointed out. That neither of these two opposing views can be exclusively true. A solution must be found in the logical relationship of one to the other. Exclusive commitment to either point of view is dangerous in terms of the social action that may result from it. At the same time, however, we must remember that these two opposing theories of society rest upon such divergent philosophical concepts of the value of truth and existence that many scholars say no reconciliation is possible.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP OF MAN TO SOCIETY: THREE MODELS

Mario Laserna, a spokesman for one wing of the Conservative party in Colombia, has suggested these three "models" for thinking about the relationship of man to society: <sup>3</sup>

##### 1. INDIVIDUALISMO RADICAL

BASE: Naturalista-biológica

ORGANISMO BASICO: El individuo

<sup>3</sup> *Individuo y sociedad* (Bogotá, 1969), pp. 33-36.

##### 2. COLECTIVISMO RADICAL (Authoritarianismo de Führer-prinzip, partido, o clase social)

BASE: Positivista-biológica

ORGANISMO BASICO: La sociedad

##### 3. EL MODELO HUMANISTA TRADICIONAL

BASE: Cultura humana

ORGANISMO BASICO: ?

Despite the fact that Laserna is writing as the spokesman for an ideological position, he has given an interesting and, on the whole, an objective presentation of three possible approaches to thinking about society. What he calls "actitudes" or "modelos" are more precisely models of positions or attitudes rather than models of thought. But I find them especially interesting because they spring from a consideration of the two alternatives we have just discussed.

The first model is that of radical individualism. Here one begins by assuming that the important thing about human society is the biological nature of man as a being. The model is that of man as part of the animal world, so that his characteristics as a biological being are the basis upon which one considers the social problem. The result of this approach, then, is to see that the social organism of fundamental importance in the individual.

The second attitude, that of radical collectivism, places us in the cross-fire of the French manner of distinguishing between the political right "derecha radical" and the political left, or "izquierda radical". Laserna's position is that whether izquierda or derecha, this radical collectivism is the authoritarianism of the clan, or of a party, or of a class. The basis of this collectivism is "positivista biológica", by which he means that it rests upon social principles derived from looking upon society as an organism. Hence the organism for this model or attitude is the biological character, not of the individual, not of the social animal, but of society itself. Within this model society is treated in accordance with the positivist pattern of thinking in a kind of Darwinian or biological evolutionary form as a social organism; it is a social organism which obeys biological principles. This pattern of thinking resembles the ideas in Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, in which he treated cultures morphologically, comparing them as biological forms. If this second model of Laserna is examined alongside the previous definition of the basic issue in society — that of the primacy of society over the individual — it appears clearly to assume that man's humanity and the good life come to him through social structure.

What is particularly significant in Mario Laserna's presentation of this concept is that this model applies equally to the radical left and to the radical right. It embraces both the Leninist concept of dictatorship of the party of the