

## LECTURE 5.

**NOTES ON THE DESTRUCTION OF MEANING\***

## DESTRUCTION OF MEANING IN ART

Visionary art denies any coherence of human life. It does not express any clear thoughts, let alone any noble sentiments. In its various forms, it scorns society as shallow and hypocritical and vindicates its own authenticity by nihilism.

Indeed, visionary art spurns society in the way visionary ecstasy spurns all secular interests and denies all meaning to the world of sensory experience.

## PARALLEL IN PUBLIC LIFE

The principles of twentieth century revolutions similarly deny the authenticity of traditional moral ideals. They spurn appeal to reason or compassion for achieving reforms. They claim that only force can be effective to achieve fundamental innovations. Violence alone is authentic, scientific, and honest in contrast to liberal sentiments which are sham and deceptive.

## PARALLEL IN SCIENTIFIC METHOD OF SCHOLARSHIP

The prevailing idea of scientific method, which goes back to Laplace and Galileo, sees ultimate reality in atomic topography controlled by the laws of physics. More particularly, as it pertains to the social sciences, we find Robert Merton supporting the view that sociology is „unethical; that is, sociologists do not ask whether particular social actions are good or bad; they seek merely to explain them.”<sup>5</sup> But to assume that you can explain an action without regarding whether it is good or bad is to

\* This text originally is the number 3 supplement material of the series of lectures planned to have 4 parts. However it is obvious from the remarks written on the different text-variants (text of the fifth meeting, lecture 5) and from the first paragraphs of the lecture *From Perception to Metaphor* that this text is the integral part of this series of lectures. Three variants of the text can be found in the collections of the University of Chicago Library. Two in Box 40, Folder 1 and one in Box 40, Folder 9. From the texts that Box 40, Folder 1 contains, we chose to publish the variant which includes corrections in handwriting. This text has not been published yet.

<sup>5</sup> Harry M. Johnson, *Sociology, a Systematic Introduction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1960). Introduced by Robert K. Merton.

assume that moral motives play no part in it. To extend this assumption to all social action is to deny the very existence of genuine moral motives in men.<sup>6</sup> This concept of scholarship corresponds exactly to the political principles of twentieth century revolutionary movements.

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But we must note that although these movements, aesthetic, political and scientific, reject the vocabulary of ideals, they tacitly accept the existence of ideals; both in art and politics, men may be actually motivated by the intense power of ideals. This internal contradiction is essential to the modern mind. It is the source of an angry sense of general absurdity in the individual, of a fanaticism fed by radical scepticism, and of the denaturing of human relations in the light of academic objectivity.

This strange mentality has grown on us since the secularization of European thought. The first shock was the destruction by science of our central position in the universe, „Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone” wrote John Donne in 1611. The complaint was in vain. Galileo claimed rightly that science „had ravished the testimony of our senses”, and we have never recovered our previous confidence in our direct non-scientific experience.

Newton’s discovery, uniting under the same mathematical formula falling apples and orbiting planets, destroyed the very conception of heaven above man. Mechanics became our world view destined to reinterpret all our beliefs.

This was the empiricist program which demolished all pre-scientific authority. It was declared by the Royal Society in 1660 in its motto, „Nullius in verba”.

The resolve to apply the „Experimental Method to the Moral Sciences” (Hume) dominated the „enlightenment”. „The belief that an irrefutable geometry of morals and politics was about to be written was the first article in the new creed.”(Bredvold 1961, 40) The first modern sceptics, Montaigne, Hobbes, and Descartes, were politically conservative. Later, with Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu and Rousseau, the opposition to authority grew into a challenge to the Roman Church and into other demands for political freedom. This trend eventually prevailed in the French Revolution which exalted the renewal of society by reason and virtue.

The first attempts to denature moral ideals by science were speculative. They came from Helvetius and were vastly expanded by Bentham. He claimed that his calculus of pleasure and pain could scientifically account for morality and justice, and all other virtues. „Utility is the supreme object which comprehends in itself law, virtue, truth and justice,” wrote Bentham. But these utilitarian theories amounted in effect only to a “pseudosubstitution.” Bentham used them for lending the support of science to human progress against cruel and obscurantist traditions. His ideas were but a scientific disguise of human values. He thus resolved for the time being the incompatibility of scientific and moral ideals in public life.

<sup>6</sup> from my paper *On the Modern Mind* (Polanyi 1965).

A similar, but far more serious, change occurred in the socialist project of society. Fourier had started socialism in accordance with certain moral ideals. Marx rejected this and declared that socialism was a historic necessity which would produce its own morality. His step changed socialism „from Utopia to a science”. Marx’s vision was an inevitable class warfare leading to dictatorship of the proletariat; with him the ideals of man (Fourier) became the hidden fuel driving a machine of sheer violence. This was to be Lenin’s communism. It rejected any moral appeal in favour of sheer violence tacitly activated by his Utopian ideals. Here was a second way the incompatibility of science and moral idealism was resolved.

Bentham and Marx were, I believe, the first to declare that the scientific analysis of man and society deprives truth, justice and moral ideals of a theoretical foundation. This coincides strangely with the first appearance of humane sentiments as a major motive of political reforms. The nineteenth century achieved an improvement of human relations in every aspect of European life. I could give many examples of it in the history of England. The utilitarian conception of man and the mechanical conception of socialism so far remained on paper. But the conflict between the mechanical conception of man and his life as a moral being began to cut deeply into the consciousness of great thinkers and writers. The response to this conflict prepared the way for the twentieth century.

The beginnings of the crisis can be traced back to Turgenev’s novel *Fathers and Sons* (1853) in which is described the effect of popular science (Büchner’s *Kraft und Stoff*), brought from Germany to Russian students. His hero Bazarov combines a radical nihilism with noble feelings of humanity. The public discussion which followed in Russia the publication of this novel confirmed that Bazarov was a true image of his contemporaries.

The conflict of these motives remained suspended for some time, but it was to be ruthlessly evaluated to its logical conclusions by Dostojevski.

It may surprise us in our time when we are confidently taught that men are machines, that Dostojevski found this idea utterly unbearable. In his *Notes from the Underground* (1864) he says that in order to prove that he cannot be controlled by depressing a set of keys, man might do anything conceivable to assert his freedom. He might go insane only to prove that he has a will of his own. Several leading characters of his four great novels, that were to follow, respond to this challenge. The very first of these was Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. He is a student who commits a murder merely to prove the independence of his personal decisions. Dostojevski shows Raskolnikov’s true moral sentiments in his rescue of two children from a burning house, by Raskolnikov, at great peril to himself. Raskolnikov wants to prove himself capable of murder in spite of his deep humanity.

Nietzsche, twenty-two years younger than Dostojevski, came across his works only after he had completed most of his work, but he recognised Dostojevski as his forerunner. Nietzsche had declared that the critical powers of man, sharpened by science, unmask all morality as mere conventions. Man in his fullness must brush

aside any such moral restrictions. One of Nietzsche's characters in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* commits a murder, like Raskolnikov, to prove himself capable of the act. The figure is in fact so similar to that of Raskolnikov that it has been wrongly assumed to be a paraphrase of Dostojevski's story.

The idea of the *act gratuit* reappears also in France at the turn of the century in the writings of Andre Gide. In a later work (*Les Caves du Vatican*, 1913) the philosophic murder itself re-appears in the person of Lafcadio who kills a fellow passenger in a train, a man quite unknown to him, merely to prove himself capable of such independent action. Like Raskolnikov, Lafcadio too, shows his unphilosophical character by saving two children from a burning house.

Dostojevski had rebelled against science, but his Raskolnikov takes over not only the reaffirmation of an independent personality to prove that he is not a machine, but also represents the Nietzschean rebel against a society which imposes on him a convention proved empty by science. He stands at the same time for a nihilistic rebellion against such a corrupt tyrannical society.

All these rebellions had actually been evoked already by popular science in Turgenyev's hero Bazarov. His words about his own nihilism comprise them. „The nihilist” he says „is the man who bows before no authority ... There is no single institution of our society which should not be destroyed.” Nihilist conceptions of revolution were to contribute their share in making Lenin's dictatorship of the proletariat fully to embody socialist moral aspirations in merciless totalitarian violence.

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My memories of the first 14 years of this century, when I grew up to manhood, clearly confirm the philosophic doubts about the status of moral ideals and the revolutionary ideas contemptuous of humanitarian progress that were spreading in Europe during the last decades preceding the first world war. Yet doubts and rebellions remained essentially theoretical. The liberal movement was still advancing and was stronger than ever. It had made Europe into a single great cultural domain sharing an intellectual, artistic and social progress of never surpassed richness.

The combination of scientific enlightenment and moral idealism was still firmly supporting this great European culture. And our minds were at home in all ideas and arts of Europe and we could travel freely anywhere without passport and settle down there without permit. The approaching rejection of our free humanitarian development at the hands of the philosophies our prophets had so long declared, lay still far beyond the range of our imagination. Our confidence in liberal peaceful progress was such that the public did not want to believe that any European war was possible. H. G. Wells has anticipated in his novel *The War of the Worlds* that the obvious menace of war would be brushed aside as mere spreading of alarms by bluffing statesmen.

When the war came years passed before it dawned on us that this might lead to

the broke of Europe. Even today it is hardly realised that the past half century of wars and revolutions have virtually destroyed Europe.

I must define more closely what I mean by the *destruction of Europe*. The First World War claimed over ten million men killed in battle, which figure includes a million killed in the Russian civil war. The Second World War killed twenty million men in battle, including four million civilians killed during the war in Germany, Poland and Russia. In addition, Germany murdered about five million Jews and the deaths caused by the Soviets by the 1923 famine, by the collectivisation of peasants in 1932 and by other deportations and executions are estimated at ten million. Thus the total of violent deaths during the years since 1914 may be assessed at forty-five million, which leaves out the killings in the Spanish Civil War and other items I will not enumerate here. We can speak of roundly 50 million killed.

The death toll is high, but does not approach (in proportion) that of the Thirty Years' War, or of the Black Death in the 14th Century; these impoverished Europe, but did not devastate it. It was the madness and the evil of the killing which marked the destruction of Europe. I think that the depth of this evil was reached in the intellectually decided and technically organised murder of five million Jews. The destruction of Europe consisted in the corruption of the minds which made them do this evil. It lay in the enslavement which enforced this corruption by whole systems of madness, stupidity and lies. This is what I mean by the destruction of Europe.

The destruction of Europe is marked by the difference persisting to this day between what the centres of European thought and art were in 1914 and what the same places are today. Compare the Munich of 1914 with that town today, or today's Berlin, or its Gottingen, its Leipzig or Prague, its Vienna, Moscow, or Budapest, compare them with what they were in 1914. Think of the fact that the genius of Russia which during the half century before the revolution produced a literature based on the greatest writers of Europe, has produced in the half century after the revolution hardly any major literary work. This is where our Europe has been reduced to a mere fraction of its previous mental existence. Add to this the present division of Europe which before 1914 was one single freely responding area of art and thought, and add the brutality and intellectual bigotry of its still enslaved parts, and also the enfeeblement of the comparatively undamaged countries, such as France and England, owing to the destruction of Central and Eastern Europe, and you have before you the destruction of Europe, as I see it.

I have said that the destruction of Europe consisted in a corruption of minds, predicted by such prophets as Dostojevski as the outcome of the scientific conception of man was heralded with opposite intentions by prophets like Nietzsche and Marx who denounced the shallowness and dishonesty of existing moral teachings and foresaw their overthrow to make way for a promised land, which Nietzsche saw beyond good and evil and Marx and Lenin saw beyond the communist revolution. I have told you how the incompatibility of man as a machine and man as a moral being was virtually ignored during the nineteenth century and so produced a kind

of humanitarian utilitarianism, as exemplified by Bentham, and how richly this theoretically unstable situation benefited the freedom, welfare and cultural life of Europe. It was the collapse of this logically unstable situation that was manifested in Lenin's revolution of 1917 and five years later in the rise of fascism in Italy, a transformation which was to spread from country to country over the major parts of Europe.

Both communism and fascism embodied noble purposes in unspeakable crimes. The secret literature of distinguished authors circulating in Soviet Russia identifies Stalin with Hitler. Hitler's followers were as convinced of their destiny of saving Germany and the world as Stalin's followers were, and both acknowledged violence as the only honest and effective means for pursuing their ideals.

We can pass from this view directly to the declarations of the artists to whom we owe the post war development of visionary art. The idea of gratuitous crime as a moral protest, which was a literary conceit before, is declared, at least theoretically, as a true expression of surrealism by Andre Breton in the mid-twenties. Camus quotes Breton as stating that „the simplest surrealist act would be to go out into the street revolver in hand and fire at random into the crowd.” They did aspire in fact to a system of total indiscriminate subversion, much as Turgenev's hero, the nihilist Bazarov, was described to be professing.

To bring us more up to date I shall quote Simone de Beauvoir on the Marquis de Sade. Writing in 1953 she hails Sade as a great moralist when he says through one of his characters: „...I have destroyed everything in my heart that might interfere with my pleasure.” This triumph of conscience, as Simone de Beauvoir calls it, she interprets in terms of her own Marxism as follows: „...Sade passionately exposes the bourgeois hoax which consists in erecting class-interests into universal (moral) principles.”

The same kind of immoralism, conceived as a moral protest against the hypocrisy of society, goes on and on, filling recent literature. This is the loss of meaning which was symbolised by visionary art since its inception a century ago.

This completes my sketch of lost meaning from the anguish of John Donne to the destruction of Europe by a public life dominated by the ideal of violence and by a visionary art coupled with an immoralism that defies a hypocritical society. It remains to say something about the fate of meaning in the pursuit of academic scholarship.

I have told you that our claims of value neutrality imply that moral duties play no part in the motivation of human action. In view of this fact all history must be explained by utilitarian motives. This kind of explanation is so persuasive today, and we are so used to this that we hardly notice its absurdity. So I shall have to give you examples of some years back, in order to convey to you the absurdity of such materialistic explanations, whether based on deep-psychology or on material interests.

Thirty years ago, when Hitler's rise to power vitally challenged our intelligence, a

whole literature of psychoanalytic treatises poured forth, explaining that wars were the result of pathological aggressiveness caused mainly by training infants too soon to cleanliness.<sup>7</sup> One of the most distinguished British psychoanalysts explained the indignation of British people at the German violation in 1914 of Belgian neutrality and at the German Chancellor's declaration that the treaty protecting Belgian neutrality was a mere 'scrap of paper' as follows, „Tearing up 'scraps of paper,' 'violating' an 'innocent little country,' defending the 'mother' country, however much they refer to current realities, are but echoes of many phantasies in which the 'good' mother or child is defended against the sinister (mostly sexual) designs of the phantasied 'bad father.'„

In the chapter entitled „The problem of prevention,“ we find on page 108 the following suggestion: „...to find out ... how many dictators, foreign secretaries, diplomats and peace delegates suffer fear of impotence. A prerequisite is the common recognition of the important facts that impotence in some cases contributes to pacific tendencies, whilst unconscious fear of impotence is a common cause of war-mindedness and grandiosity.“(Glover 1935, 38)

Examples of such absurdities were produced more recently by the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer. In his book *The American People* he explains the American opposition to an unbalanced national budget by the fact that most American babies are fed only at regular intervals and consequently learn to experience hunger. (Gorer 1948, 77) In another book *The People of Great Russia* (Gorer 1949) he explains the typical behaviour of Russians under Stalin “in the main” by the habit of wrapping babies tightly. Within a year Stalinism was to be extended to Czechoslovakia, Hungary and China, and it very nearly established itself in Greece and Italy, yet Gorer's study is still quoted today without anybody asking whether babies are swaddled in these countries. The credulity of modern man faced with a tough scientific explanation of man, is unlimited.

Psychoanalysis was one of the two major principles used for explaining man's thought as determined by material motives. Another of these was Marxism with its many variants. It initiated a sociology which explained knowledge as a product of social circumstances. Around 1932 this movement brought forth, at the initiative of Moscow, a whole literature explaining the progress of science as a response to material needs.

A distinguished British scientist, Lancelot Hogben, F.R.S. could write in 1938, „From the landman's point of view the earth remained at rest till it was discovered that pendulum clocks lose time if taken to places near the equator. After the invention of Huyghens, the earth's axial motion was a socially necessary foundation for the colonial export of pendulum clocks.“(Hogben 1938)

We had heard of the Copernican Revolution, of the genius of Kepler and Galileo still engaged in heavy fighting for the heliocentric view of the universe eighty years

<sup>7</sup> For a textbook summing up the results of this movement of thought see Kimball Young, *Social Psychology* (Young 1944, 44).

after the death of Copernicus, we knew of Newton's sweeping triumph after another four decades vindicating this view, by reaching out to a supreme feat of genius, while standing, as he said, on the shoulders of giants. We believed that, as the inscription on his statue in Cambridge tells us (in Latin), by his discovery of universal gravity „he surpassed the human mind.” Yet the real cause of this intellectual revolution had apparently eluded us. Professor Hogben has revealed now that it lay in the influence exercised by the exporters of pendulum clocks who had slightly to shorten their clocks when selling them in the tropics.

Such theories were put forward with no supporting evidence and nobody asked for evidence. Nobody enquired whether any pendulum clocks were ever exported to the tropics and, if so, how the clockmakers impressed their difficulties on the general public.

Any account of mental action which explained it in terms denying the powers of truth and of other human ideals and which reduced man thereby into a bundle of appetites or pathological complexes, was accepted without a murmur.

Listen to the story told two years ago in *Encounter* (January, 1964) by a distinguished expert on Soviet countries, Professor Richard Pipes, then Associate Director of Harvard University's Russian Research Center. Professor Pipes wrote:

„Four years ago, when writing an essay on the Russian intelligentsia for the journal *Daedalus*, I wanted to conclude it with a brief statement to the effect that the modern Russian intellectual had a very special mission to fulfill: 'to fight for truth.' On the advice of friends I omitted this passage since it sounded naive and unscientific. Now I regret having done so...” (Pipes 1964)

Thus at the most influential academic center studying Soviet affairs, it took three years after the rebellion of writers at the Petöfi Circle for it to be mooted for the first time that this kind of unrest was due to a craving for truth. Even then this suggestion was suppressed in deference to expert opinion, because to speak of intellectuals fighting for truth was held to be „naive and unscientific.”

The refusal to recognise truth and moral purpose as effective motives of social action is based on the principle of value neutrality. We can find this principle emphatically stated in a recently published authoritative textbook. It opens with a formal statement of its principles in four points. The fourth of these principles declares that sociology is

*unethical*; that is, sociologists do not ask whether particular social actions are good or bad; they seek merely to explain them.

Some sociologists would seek to qualify this principle, but very few effectively do so. It is predominantly accepted and cherished as securing the scientific character of sociology.

To assume that you can explain an action without regarding whether it is good or bad is to assume that moral motives play no part in it. To extend this assumption to all social action is to deny the very existence of genuine moral motives in men. When I protest against such doctrines, I am assured that the sociologists who teach

this moral nihilism are themselves men of high moral principles, supporting noble causes in public life. This is thought to put the matter right. It is considered quite in order that we should teach absurd views – that we do not believe – because we think that they are scientific.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the ideal of strict objectivity, borrowed from physics, has denatured man's purpose in public life, his image of himself in the arts and the interpretation of history in the universities. Our culture, motivated by high purpose, expresses it as violence, caused by inarticulate visions and animal appetites. This, I believe to have caused the fall of Europe, and it is this destruction of meaning which continues to beset us today.

<sup>8</sup> Harry M. Johnson, *Sociology: A Systematic Introduction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., 1960, and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961). In the Foreword, Robert K. Merton writes: "With this book Mr. Johnson joins the small circle of ... masters of sociological writing..."