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THEY SAID IT

In 1927, the French essayist Julien Benda published his famous attack on the intellectual corruption of the age, *La Trahison des clercs*. . . . Benda tells us that he uses the term “clerc” in “the medieval sense” to mean “scribe” – someone we would now call a member of the intelligentsia. Academics and journalists, pundits, moralists, and pontificators of all varieties are in this sense *clercs*. . . . The “treason” in question was the betrayal by the “clerks” of their vocation as intellectuals. From the time of the pre-Socratics, intellectuals, considered in their role as intellectuals, had been a breed apart. In Benda’s terms, they were understood to be “all those whose activity essentially is not the pursuit of practical aims, all those who seek their joy in the practice of an art or a science or a metaphysical speculation, in short in the possession of non-material advantages.” Thanks to such men, Benda wrote, “humanity did evil for two thousand years, but honored good. This contradiction was an honor to the human species, and formed the rift whereby civilization slipped into the world.” . . .

[Benda did not] believe that intellectuals, as citizens, necessarily *should* abstain from political commitment or practical affairs. The “treason” or betrayal he sought to publish concerned the way that intellectuals had lately allowed political commitment to insinuate itself into their understanding of the intellectual vocation as such. Increasingly, Benda claimed, politics was “mingled with their work as artists, as men of learning, as philosophers.” The ideal of disinterested judgment and faith in the universality of truth: such traditional guiding principles of intellectual life were more and more contemptuously deployed as masks when they were not jettisoned altogether. Benda castigated this development as the “*desire to abase the values of knowledge before the values of action.*”

Roger Kimball, “The treason of the intellectuals and “the undoing of thought,” *The New Criterion*, December, 1992.

BOLLINGER’S DILEMMA.

Karl Marx believed that capitalism would not last, that under such a system the proletariat would become immiserized, revolt, overthrow the bourgeois social order, and establish a communist society in its place.

The great leftist theoretician Antonio Gramsci, while in a prison cell in Turi, Italy in the 1920s, pondered why the proletariat revolution that Marx had forecast had never occurred. He decided that the prevailing culture had infected the working class with the belief that their well being was linked directly to the well being of the bourgeoisie.

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Gramsci concluded that Marx and Lenin had never considered the possibility that the workers of the world would become comfortable in a capitalist society. This dynamic duo of economic and sociological falderal believed that the only thing that kept the proletariat from full-scale revolt was physical force and economic coercion.

Gramsci described the process by which the proletariat was actually kept in check as “cultural hegemony.” His solution to the problem was to abandon the effort to inform the proletariat about the wrongs they were suffering at the hands of capitalism and to focus on tearing down the Judeo-Christian culture that had blinded them to their “unjust” burden. To achieve this end, he proposed taking control of the institutions of the culture, including the arts, the mass media, the entertainment industry, and the educational establishment. Hence the phrase, “the long march through the institutions.”

Needless to say, this tactic has been extraordinarily effective in promoting radical liberalism in the United States. While conservatives have focused their attention on the world of politics and business, liberals gained a choke hold on the institutions that shape the imaginations, the dreams, the beliefs, the prejudices, the “truths,” and the political attitudes of the American people; the institutions that systematically create the “social myths” that Max Eastman characterized as “ideas not valid, but necessary to set the masses in motion.” Working from this base, the left has done a remarkably effective job of undermining the foundations of America’s Judeo-Christian culture, just as Gramsci envisioned.

But, as the great Bard of Ayrshire once noted, the best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft agley. And somewhere along the line, despite Gramsci’s sage council, Communism “withered away,” to borrow a phrase from Marx, leaving its American apostolates in Hollywood, the media, and the nation’s universities laboring away for a sputtering cause.

Yes, of course, American liberalism still lives, but what of the dream of a utopian society freed from the vice called religion, which Shelley once claimed “smother’d

Reason’s babes in their birth.” How do you carry on the fight for socialism when Russia and China have all but given up and the titular head of the home team is the quintessentially bourgeois Hillary Clinton, who no longer travels with her fellow leftists but with the suits from Goldman Sachs?

Like those legendary Japanese soldiers who reportedly remained in the jungles on remote islands of the Philippines for decades after VJ Day, unaware that the war was over, fighting for Tojo and the Imperial Army, folks like Alec Baldwin, Michael Moore, Steven Spielberg, and yes, Lee Bollinger diligently battle on even though they no longer have any real hope of replacing the system they hate with the kind of Marxist state that inspired them to join the cause in the first place.

Ordinarily, a story such as this would not be all that interesting. After all, human history is filled with instances of armies being left behind at the front to die after their cause is lost. But this particular tale contains a fascinating twist. In this story the abandoned army is presented with the option of continuing the fight under a different flag. There is, however, a moral dilemma involved.

Yesterday, they were fighting against the capitalist hegemon on behalf of such left wing fetishes as inclusiveness, equality, tolerance, racial harmony, freedom from religious bigotry, women’s rights, homosexuality, and an all powerful, secular, central government run by technocrats. They occupied the moral high ground. Three cheers for the Silesian weavers, Babeuf, Blanqui, Weitling, Bakunin, Marx, Spain in 1937, Vladimir and Sasha, Uncle Joe, Che, Fidel, socialism, communism, the oppressed.

Today, if they choose, they can carry on the fight, but to do so they must align themselves with a cause that is different from theirs, with Jacobins of another stripe, with men who are “less enlightened,” so to speak, intellectual primitives, unlettered barbarians, steeped in medieval superstition, men who stone adulteresses, condone rape, view women as chattel, execute homosexuals, men who wear intolerance as a badge of honor.

A scintilla of morality, or even the simple patriotism of a plowman, would make it a tough choice. For Lee Bollinger, however, it is an easy one. He long ago shed these pedestrian fetters. He is president of one of the world's great universities, a scholar, learned, enlightened. He has labored all of his life, under the aegis of the great Communist Olympian Gramsci, to achieve this high office for the purpose of using it to undermine Western culture and replace it with a more just order, a socialist order. A noble man is he. He loves his country as he believes it should be, not as it is.

Like his comrades in arms, he has grown cynical as he has grown older. His dream of being one of an advanced guard that will defeat the existing order and replace it with a socialist one has faded somewhat. His hatred of the existing order has grown commensurately with his frustration at its resilience. How does one explain Ronald Reagan, George Bush, George W. Bush? These fools. At the same time, his faith in the inevitability of socialism has waned as he has witnessed its failure to produce idyllic results in other lands. The Russians. The Chinese. These fools. It should have been so simple. But they couldn't get it right.

Then lo, he is presented with an opportunity, a terrible, dreadful, appalling, Faustian opportunity. A new enemy of his old enemy has appeared on the scene. Powerful, well funded, energetic, willing to do what his old allies, the communists, were not willing to do, to take on the entrenched, fascist establishment in America, to drive it out, to defeat it, to meet it on the battlefields of the world, to destroy its landmarks with bombs if necessary, to discredit its good works, to make it a pariah in the world. How could this be bad? Isn't the enemy of my enemy, my friend?

He knows it is a pact with the devil. Of course, he does. But communist intellectuals have allied themselves with many devils over the decades as a means of furthering their cause. Have they not? As Trinculo famously noted, misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows.

Indeed, one thinks of the words of Bertold Brecht, an intellectual, mind you, who had just won the "Stalin Peace Prize" in 1956 at the same time that Nikita Khrushchev produced evidence that confirmed that the "man of steel" was a mass murderer.

I have a horse. He is lame, mangy and he squints. Someone comes along and says: but the horse squints, he is lame and, look here, he is mangy. He is right, but what use is that to me? I have no other horse. There is no other. The best thing, I think, is to think about his faults as little as possible.

And so, one assumes that Bollinger thinks as little as possible about the faults of his new found ally, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Mahmoud wishes to destroy that which Bollinger wishes to destroy. That's all ye know, and all ye need to know.

THE FALL.

There can be little question that America is in the midst of a culture war. For years now, two factions in American society, roughly (though not exactly) parallel to the factions represented in the old right-left economic divide, have been battling over the kind of nation that the United States is and will be, over the very definition of morality. Most observers trace the origins of this state of war back to the turbulent decade of the 1960s, when the combination of the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and a youthful rebellion against traditional social and cultural norms provoked a clash between the old and the new, the conventional and the hip, the conservative and the progressive that continues to rage full force today.

Though we would be fools to deny the obvious importance of the 1960s and the '60s generation to the current culture wars, we believe that the seeds of this war were planted a little earlier. In a broad sense, the clash of moral systems on which this culture war is based has been a constant characteristic of Western civilization, particularly since the French Revolution, when the repudiation of the so-called *ancien regime*

became a societal “virtue.” But in a narrower, more specific sense, we believe that the cultural rebellion of the 1960s began in earnest a decade earlier, with the publication of the literature that would motivate and inspire its youthful readers.

Along with an extensive and impressive catalogue of scholars and theorists on both the right and the left, from the aforementioned Antonio Gramsci to our friend Claes Ryn, we believe that the stories, fables, and legends that people read (or hear) contribute heavily to the attitudes, perspectives, and ideologies that they embrace. And the stories and fables of the late 1950s more than set the stage for the next decade’s revolution and the upheaval that followed.

The most obvious and pertinent example, of course, is Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, the book that *The New York Times* called “the clearest and most important utterance” of the post-World War II generation. Given that this summer is the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of this “masterpiece,” every nostalgic aging hippy with a forum has praised Kerouac’s radicalism anew. As proto-hippy (and the former Mr. Hanoi Jane) Tom Hayden recently put it:

I was a high school senior in Royal Oak, Michigan, when I read, absorbed and lived the spirit of *On The Road*. His [Kerouac’s] writing was simply breathtaking, breaking all the conventions, the periods and commas and paragraphs that imposed a false order on the speed and flow of reality, the reality of everyday life that he observed and recorded because he believed it was all there was. He wrote like I am writing now but I cannot recreate the brilliant exploding frenzy of his pace that shook our generation.

Kerouac’s self-absorbed amorality dripped from his pages and became the inspiration of a cohort that confused freedom with libertinism and responsibility with repression.

But if Kerouac provoked the sexual revolution and inspired the abandonment of traditional sexual mores, others played as significant, if not more significant

roles in undermining the broader moral structure. Take, for example, the French-Algerian existentialist and hero to the left, Albert Camus. The year before Kerouac published *On the Road*, Camus published his own attack on the traditional moral order in his novel *The Fall*. Camus’ tale is a conversation between the main character, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, and a stranger, i.e. the reader. Clamence, who was once a prominent Parisian lawyer, tells of his life and his fall from grace, all in an attempt to confess his sin and to demonstrate the randomness and absurdity of human existence.

Clamence, you see, had been a righteous man, a defender of the downtrodden, a friend to the friendless, a man who sought to achieve “more than the vulgar ambitious man and rising to that supreme summit where virtue is its own reward.” But on one unfortunate evening, Clamence happened to be crossing the Pont Royal, and saw a woman near the side of the bridge. As he walked on, he heard something, presumably the woman, fall into the water. But he merely continued on his way. The sound of the screams, according to Clamence, “repeated several times, downstream; then it abruptly ceased. The silence that followed, as the night suddenly stood still, seemed interminable.” Clamence continued:

I wanted to run and yet didn’t move an inch. I was trembling, I believe from cold and shock. I told myself that I had to be quick and felt an irresistible weakness steal over me. I have forgotten what I thought then. “Too late, too far...or something of the sort. I was still listening as I stood motionless. Then, slowly, in the rain, I went away. I told no one.

Though Clamence tortures himself with the knowledge that he committed a heinous act by leaving the woman to drown, in the end, he succumbs to his desperation and he (and Camus) concludes that life and the moral codes under which it is lived are absurd. That the otherwise righteous life of a man can be destroyed by one act of misfeasance is too much for Clamence (and Camus) to handle and he therefore has no choice but to conclude that life is meaningless and that morality and righteousness are meaningless as

well. His life was destroyed by one random encounter, which points up the sheer absurdity of the entire human endeavor.

Fast forward now to last week. It is not often that those of us who complain about the moral decay of society get the opportunity to cite a perfect and specific example of what we mean, but tragically, we have that chance today. According to the BBC, last week, a young boy was drowning, after jumping into a pond to save his sister, who had fallen in. Unlike the woman in Camus' /Clamence's tale, the boy was not trying to kill himself, nor were his screams carried "too far" downstream, given that the pond was a mere six feet deep. Also unlike Camus' /Clamence's tale, those who knew what was happening yet did nothing to help, were not mere random passersby. They were police officers, or, more specifically, "Police Community Support Officers," who "did not enter the water" and did not even try to save the boy.

Fifty-one years ago, even Albert Camus, the most prominent and most engaging of the absurdists, understood that allowing someone to drown while doing nothing was, by traditional standards, a heinous act, no matter how righteously a man had previously lived. And that, of course, is why he thought it necessary to undermine those traditional standards.

Today, his efforts have seen their fruits, since not only did the PCSOs in question decide not to help, but it apparently never occurred to them or their superiors that their inaction might be construed as immoral. The traditional standards Camus and others sought to destroy have indeed been destroyed.

You see, the defense that the PCSOs and their bosses gave was not that they were scared or unsure or even indolent, but merely that they were, according to the BBC, "not trained to deal with the incident" and thus were unsure of the proper (i.e. moral) course of action. So instead they watched as a 10-year-old boy died, and apparently to the gratitude of their superiors:

Paul Kelly, chairman of the Police Federation in Manchester, said PCSOs do not have the same level of training as police officers to deal with life-saving situations....

"They take a person and dress him up as a police officer but they just don't have the same powers.

"Every single police officer I trained with left training school with a life-saving certificate of some sort."

He said the PCSOs might not have been able to swim and in that case they should not have risked their lives.

(Did we mention that the water was 6 feet deep?)

One can argue that the fault here does not lie specifically with the officers in question and that they were merely following the rules. Indeed, some observers have done just that, suggesting that the culprit in this case is "procedure" and the submission of human decision-making to procedure. True though that may be, it also misses the broader point. The officers here didn't merely substitute procedure for morality. What this incident demonstrates more than anything else is that for many in the post-modern West, procedure does not merely trump morality, it *is* morality, because there is nothing else. The traditional morality has been so effectively and completely destroyed that the procedural/bureaucratic code has become a moral code unto itself.

This is a problem we have addressed at various times over the years, discussing as we have the clash of moral systems. The moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has noted in his classic *After Virtue* that the assault on the traditional Western view of morality, led by the likes of Camus, Kerouac, Nietzsche, Sartre, and others, has resulted in widespread adherence to what he calls "emotivism," or the "doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral

judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character,” which is to say that “what once was morality has to some large degree disappeared.”

Into the void left by the ruin of traditional morality, other moral codes, other ways of ordering life and of determining proper or “moral behavior,” have been substituted. That one would substitute a bureaucratic code for traditional morality should hardly come as a surprise. Indeed, MacIntyre himself foresaw it:

[Politics will] oscillate between a freedom which is nothing but a lack of regulation of individual behavior [see Kerouac] and forms of collectivist control designed only to limit the anarchy of self-interest. The consequences of a victory by one side or the other are often of the highest immediate importance; but, as Solzhenitsyn has understood so well, both ways of life are in the long run intolerable. Thus the society in which we live is one in which bureaucracy and individualism are partners as well as antagonists. And it is in the cultural climate of this bureaucratic individualism that the motivist self is naturally at home.”

The liberal Baby Boomers who came of age during the 1960s pride themselves on their willingness to confront “the establishment” and their destruction of their own *ancien regime*. They claim that they helped make women free and equal, yet never acknowledge the damage that “freedom” has done to actual women. They claim to have inaugurated a sexual revolution, but never acknowledge that the damage that revolution has done to society at large, from the spread of disease to the proliferation of out-of-wedlock births. They

claim to have expanded the definition of family but have never acknowledged the damage the expansion of that definition has done to real people, especially children. And they claim to have taken down the old moral order, never acknowledging that the old order has been replaced by other moral codes that are far more random and absurd and far more damaging.

The difference between Camus’ protagonist and the PCSOs in Manchester is that one acknowledged a moral shortcoming and used it to attack the greater moral order, while the others and their superiors actually believe that what they did was morally justified, indeed was morally mandated, and that there is no need for them to feel guilt or remorse.

We don’t doubt that Camus would be proud to see the old order destroyed. But we can’t help but think that even he would be appalled at what took its place. Certainly, we don’t believe that a “moral” code that would justify inertia in the face of a ten-year-old’s struggle for life was what he had in mind.

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