

INSTITUTIONALIZED STUPIDITY

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GROUP & INDIVIDUAL THOUGHT

In politics, as elsewhere, the large group is bad for the mind. It engenders processes of thinking that are at a lower level than individual thinking in solitude. The individual can consider any problem in its full complexity. She/he thinks of many explanations, approaches, and solutions, with their implications. The full array of relevant factors appears to the mind's eye, and she/he can consider and weigh alternatives and variable relations. In a word, the individual engages in analysis. For the large group, everything is simpler. Alternative approaches to a problem are viewed starkly as bad form. Few, if any, complications are recognized, and any effort at analysis is rejected, not because it is bad or disapproved, but simply because it is analysis. It involves intolerable complications. To understand it, effort is required, and this effort dampens group enthusiasm and momentum. The group rejects it in favor of simple resolutions.

The *hoopla* of an American political convention gives us a clear image of group thinking. To succeed, a convention speaker must excite the audience, and must keep the remarks simple enough so that each member of the crowd can assume that all the others are responding to the same idea or emblem. If there is too much subtlety or complexity in an idea, each person hearing the address will feel that she/he must respond as an individual rather than as one of the crowd. Group excitement therefore cannot occur with complex ideas. Speakers sometimes get dangerously close to analysis, and the crowd member can sense the threshold where thoughts become too weighty for the group to bear. Beyond that threshold, a rational individual may concur in what he hears, but the group cannot become enthusiastic. To see this, we need only imagine the spectacle of a speaker considering the alternative actions which are available to the government when the nation is caught between inflation and unemployment. To admit that there are complexities involved would be

depressing. In contrast, the speaker who is considered successful is the one who electrifies the audience and brings it to a standing ovation. This feat is accomplished by presenting thoughts that are beneath the intellectual level of the duller members of the crowd. Each member responds as she/he does because crowd enthusiasm assumes a value greater than that of the member's own intellect.

HOW THE GROUP REDUCES THOUGHT

Georg Simmel considered this phenomenon in his discussion of the individual in relation to groups of varying size (1950 31, 93). He argued that large groups develop thoughts and feelings around the lowest common denominator, thus reducing the finest members of the group to the level of the lowest. Even where each member of a group is capable of intelligent thought, according to Simmel, the group itself will be irrational, and will concentrate on the simplest of thoughts.

It would be encouraging if the group and its low-level processes of thought are dominant only when the group is in session. It would be pleasant to see the upsurge of enthusiasm which may be noted at political conventions or other large gatherings as the only form that this dominance takes. If so, it might be thought that individuals always know better when they are removed from the group and return in solitude to the higher level of thought that they had left behind. This does happen sometimes with some persons, under some conditions. But such a reversion to higher-level thought is by no means certain, or even likely. What frequently occurs instead is that the individual internalizes the group's style of thinking. One abdicates solitude and intellectual independence and thinks as the group thinks.

CAPITULATION TO THE GROUP

Whether the individual capitulates to the group or insists on thinking for her/himself depends on the situation. Some forms of social structure compel the capitulation.

Others encourage independence and the higher thought processes. It is because of this covariation of capitulation and independence with social structural variation that we call the capitulation *institutionalized stupidity*.

The sociological and social psychological tradition of G. H. Mead, Cooley, and Asch provides us with resources for understanding what institutionalized stupidity is. In this tradition, the thinking of real people is partly a social process. It is negotiation between self and other in which the other does not just influence thought, but is one of a pair of dialectically related elements which constitute it. To think is to interact. To think in solitude is to interact with internalized others. It is "taking the role of the other" and of the self in the privacy of one's own mind. And if to think is social, so also is thinking that something exists or is true. We may use the term *thinking* when referring to this social process, while reserving the term *thought* for the pure mental processes in which a mind does nothing but sift evidence and draw logical conclusions.

Central to this concept of thinking is the idea that the self always covets the approval of others, whether the "others" are actual social persons, or an internalized *generalized other* in the Meadian sense. Approval is not only desired, but is perceived as the very existence of the self. Others put the self together, so to speak, by their approval. They bring it into being and keep it in being. Through the affirming attitude of others, the self is born. By the disapproving or disaffectionate attitude of others, the self is dissipated and destroyed. To the extent to which an *other* is significant, the other's approval is experienced as life-giving, and the other's disapproval has a nightmare, ghoulish quality which the self experiences as dissolution and banishment. In fact, *thought* knows nothing of such concepts as truth or being. It simply processes experience in such a way as to improve anticipations of future experience. An assertion that something is "true," which is not a prediction, is a distinctive kind of statement, and it is supremely social in the sense just described. The quality of

being "true" is the quality of being affirmed by others.

INDIVIDUALS AS STARTERS

A crowd is in attendance at a symphony concert. At a certain point in the concert, there is applause—an action that is supremely that of a group and not of an individual. It was an individual, however, who started it. Some one person had to be the first to applaud. The first person to start clapping hands did not do so with the idea that the hall would be filled with the sharp sounds of her/his applause. Instead, this person saw her/himself as starting or merely participating in the general applause. The anticipation of others joining in was part of the starter's act. Similarly, when someone asserts that something is true—for example, that the United States is a democracy—one does so in the anticipation of affirming gestures from others. And these anticipated affirming gestures are what constitute the *truth* quality of what one asserts.

EVALUATING ACADEME

The occurrence of institutionalized stupidity should not be surprising. For example, everyone in academic life is familiar with the practice of evaluating the performance of scholars by observing their research and publications, and more particularly, by *counting* their publications. Of course all agree that there is no clear connection between the number of publications and the value of scholarly output. But the scholars of whom we speak here are individuals, and individuals who are engaged in thought. The group is much less inhibited, and readily comes to view the sheer number of publications as a score representing the value of scholarly output. Here we have a sharp contrast between high-level individual *thought* and low-level group *thinking*. But it is what happens next that is important. Individuals begin thinking as the group thinks. They too, even in the privacy of their own reflections, come to see the number of publications as being identical with the value of the output. The belief that quantity thus measures value takes on an *everybody-*

knows-it quality that precludes denial or even questioning.

If pressed, of course, many individuals would agree that the quality of output is not identical with number of publications. But this agreement would come with a sigh to the effect that it is inevitable that the two would be regarded as identical. The phrase "would be regarded" is in the passive voice, which indicates that we are dealing with a group. There is no particular person who so regards it. It simply is so regarded. Or it is so regarded by a mysterious *they* who cannot be identified. And it is but a short step from seeing this low-level thinking as inevitable to seeing it as right and good. Scholars hide behind the *they* and the inevitability so no one can see that they concur in this low-level judgment. Ironically, intelligence is abandoned in the very processes that are supposed to exalt it.

INDIVIDUAL ESCAPE

It is one's occasional ability to think for oneself as an individual, rather than one's frequent capitulation to the group, that requires explanation. Because assertions of truth anticipate approval, capitulation is the normal course. If individuals do sometimes resist the group's power and think independent, subtle thoughts, special factors must be involved. Somehow the group has approved its own adversary, and has endorsed the individual's resistance to its own power.

Ortega y Gasset (1932 11) distinguished *select* man from *mass* man. *Select* man is the one who stands outside the crowd. He sets himself apart in attending to the excellent rather than to the merely popular. But excellence should not be viewed simply as a quality of a person. Rather, it is a quality of a person that is undergirded by the support of the mass. The mass holds up the thing or quality which supercedes and rises above its character as the mass. The mass escapes its own mediocrity by producing and supporting the *select* from which it is distinguished.

ORTEGA'S ARISTOCRACY

The word for this *select* group is *aristocracy*. Ortega insisted that civilization

depends upon aristocracy. His lament in *The Revolt of the Masses* was that modern mass man had begun to put himself in the place of the aristocrat, and so to put his own mediocre reflections in the place of true thought. As an institution, aristocracy represents both superiority over and support by the group as a whole. It is a superior group, distinguished from the majority by being above it. Yet it is only by virtue of the mass that it is in this exalted position. That the aristocracy is above the mass is not merely its own judgment. If it were, it would not be above the mass, and there would exist only conceit. *Above* is only a societal construction, and it derives from society as a whole. An aristocrat in Ortega's sense is a person who is given a license by society to be better than society.

By itself, being *better* would be without content. It is the *honor* of the aristocrat that gives it meaning. Peter Berger (1973) suggested that honor is mainly a thing of the past, and something that belongs to the hierarchical kind of society. In the case of the aristocrat, it refers to the standards of conduct which must be met to fulfill one's position as aristocrat. They are not obligations laid on all people, but on those who stand out from the crowd as special and superior. In supporting the aristocracy, the mass also supports the aristocracy's special obligation. People insist that aristocrats fulfill the obligations by which they stand out from these same masses of people. It is a strange kind of insistence, for it requires its object to separate and even oppose itself. It condemns capitulation to itself; it rewards liberation from itself.

THE SCIENTIST AS ARISTOCRAT

The scientist is a latter-day version of such an aristocrat. Exactly as scientist, she/he must state the truth even where it contradicts the sacred beliefs of the masses and of other scientists. Should she/he fail to do so, the stature of the scientist is reduced. If as scientist, one persists in the lonely pursuit of truth, one fulfills the image of scientist, and rises in stature. But one's identity and stature as a scientist are not private judgments of one's own. Nor do they come just from the in-group of scientists.

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conclude that the choice of *no preference* over *independent* is a random one for young whites. Among young blacks, however, the choice of *no preference* is apparently part of a complex of attitudes including lack of political involvement and low perceptions of government relevance. Those who do research dealing with partisanship among the young should remember that blacks may be expressing a degree of alienation and distance from the system by the *no preference* response—a response which is dissimilar in implication from that of whites. We certainly should not collapse the independents and no-preference groups into one category without first performing tests for racial and involvement differences. These results have several added implications. More than a decade after the Civil Rights movement reached its peak, and after almost two years of the “friendly” Carter Administration, we still find young blacks substantially below whites in involvement with the political system. Moreover, they project those attitudes into their responses to the general political-party system. Even the label *independent* represents more attachment to politics than the young blacks can accept. This distance from politics also reflects more than alienation or lack of influence on the system. These young blacks fail to see that the government has much to do with the way they live their lives. Such feelings are not likely to kindle an activist spirit for social or political change. It is more likely that they lay the groundwork for continued adult cynicism and withdrawal from politics.

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(MacNair, from p 155)

Rather, they come from society and belong to society. It is the broad mass of people which generates the image of *scientist*, and it is only due to the support of that broad mass that the term carries its specific and honorific meaning. When one takes pride in being a scientist, one is taking a bow before society as audience and authenticator. Although only a select company of colleagues can evaluate the scientist’s work and stature, it is a far larger group of lay persons who gives the image of scientist its substance and sanctity.

Generally, standards of esthetic integrity, logical consistency, factual veracity, and practical realism, applied within their relevant context, depend on aristocratism in this sense. The lament or the ambivalence about modern society by men like Ortega is that aristocracy in this sense has weakened or disappeared. Modern mass humanity has thrown off many shackles, including those of special status. For this reason, people who ought to be leaders have become followers. They participate in the low-level thought of the select. Good thinking receives little honor or recognition. The mediocre reflections of the group parade as wisdom and get all the applause. Even in high places—government, universities, and others—people strive more to be “with it” and to reflect the majority than to be right. This is institutionalized stupidity.

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