

Review

Meaning and Change: Explorations in the Cultural Sociology of Modern Societies. By ROLAND ROBERTSON. New York: New York University Press, 1978. 284 pages. \$17.50.

Critical reflection on questions of social order may be an indicator that established ways are no longer to be taken for granted. The concern of major figures among the founders of modern sociology with the role of religion in collective human affairs serve as a clue that the complex of values and beliefs undergirding Western civilization is losing its transcendental sanction.

The social sciences themselves—in their more comprehensive critical preoccupations—were modes of reflection on the disintegration of traditional societies and the loss of the overarching authority that made both beliefs and practices appear natural to their members. As an early example, Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* challenged existing sanctions and legitimations for economic behavior and presented an entirely new prescription whose authority derived from Nature itself and “the invisible hand” of the Author who kept His creation in balance; Smith in fact advocated change while apparently describing the “natural” play of economic forces.

In *Meaning and Change* Roland Robertson grapples with what he considers two central issues of classical sociology, issues that remain with us in more aggravated form as the winds of change continue to alter the cultural landscapes of the West. On what authority does culture rest? What gives legitimacy to the values, beliefs, prescriptions that have seemed central and essential? More sharply stated, has not this authority, especially in its more transcendent forms, vanished almost completely? The loss of the authority which gives stability to values and meanings forces a further question: Where does the individual find a meaningful identity in the midst of a plurality of commitments? How can personhood be undergirded if all foundations are insecure?

The seminal figures to which Robertson turns in his analysis are Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel, with considerable attention to G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx along the way. The first six chapters contain this analysis. After two chapters dealing primarily with religion in Britain, a final chapter on secularization uses the contemporary debate to approach the question of the substantive meaning of religion and the “loss of religion” from another perspective. For the most part, however, Weber’s distinctions between inner and other worldly, asceticism and mysticism, substantial and instrumental rationality define the boundaries within which the argument proceeds.

The existence of the crises to which Robertson refers hardly needs documentation. Across international boundaries the pollsters have collected the evidence of a uniform distrust of central institutions and their major functionaries: governments, universities, churches, corporations, unions. More crucial—this is the heart of the argument—than the lack of faith in

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institutions is the erosion of belief in the values, the transcendental sanctions which gave institutions their warrant, that made following their directives something to be "taken for granted." It is not even so much that people no longer believe in God (great numbers still do) but that the nexus between belief and "the ways things are to be done" is broken. Personally some transcendent Other may still provide consolation; socially the power to shape conduct has been lost.

Robertson concerns himself primarily with the historical development of this cultural erosion. The key word that unlocks what he is after is "rationalization." (The very ambiguity of the word when used alone may be itself a symptom of our difficulties!) Weber, the central figure in the argument, made the increasing rationalization of the West a primary focus of his investigations. The famous essay, "The Protestant Ethic," gained its force from its argument that, by applying reason most rigorously to the disciplines of the life of faith, Calvinism indirectly made possible the development of an increasingly rationalized society.

In his concern for the basic values out of which the Western world arose Robertson rarely traces direct connections with the development of the natural sciences. Yet we must not overlook two major lines of relationships. First, the development of science and of mathematics went hand in hand; mathematics may be seen as a prime example of the capacities of the human mind for abstract logical exercises, for the practice of "pure reason." Second, the ideological movement which accompanied modern science, argued for, and diffused its underlying commitment to a cosmic order was the Enlightenment. "Nature's God" provided the transcendental legitimation for the new age.

The Enlightenment program was not purely constructive. Its intellectuals were, for the most part, passionate in their determination to dismantle existing establishments, chiefly monarchy and church. Priests and prelates, traditional aristocrats and royal overlords were denounced as charlatans and tyrants in the name of the god of nature and of fundamental human rights. A mature humankind did not need the support of paternalistic institutions. Enlightened reason would be sufficient.

Post-Enlightenment thinkers were to discover the multivalent character of reason. Weber taught sociologists to distinguish between substantial and instrumental reason. Fundamentalists, for example, taking certain revealed truths as given, could establish logically "the truth" of traditional dogmas. In a more attractive way Thomas Aquinas had set the example much earlier.

More interestingly fundamentalists of various kinds, political as well as theological, could live comfortably with modern science, interpreted from the perspective of instrumental rationality. Many scientists, refusing the lure of metaphysical adventures, found the positivist version of science attractive. Language analysis, by an interesting quirk, proved attractive to fundamentalists and positivists alike.

The development of instrumental rationality—more accurately the devastation of more and more of the domain in which substantial rationality could be exercised—began to overwhelm many Western intellectuals. If we increasingly believe that no overall value propositions are valid, if the value propositions which Christianity supplied have evaporated, if all "ought" assertions represent only choices and not socially valid prescriptions, then all acceptance of norms becomes a matter of preference—or coercion. The instrumental

rationalist need not ask whether the cause is good; he need only ask whether his talents are needed and the pay is acceptable.

If cultural directives no longer can be undergirded with authority, in what sense is meaningful existence possible? What can be the locus of commitment? If commitment to a transcendent Other as the author of personhood, of meaning, of the ultimate source of order by which the cosmos can be affirmed is no longer possible, then we indeed have become the architects of our own personhood. With such therapeutic help as we can command (Robertson cites Philip Rieff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*), not only religion but the entire realm of values becomes transferred into the domain of subjective preferences. Culture is a matter of choice. (Thus Robertson quite consciously carries the argument of Thomas Luckman's *The Invisible Religion* one step further.) An inner worldly mysticism with some ascetic dimensions may be the best choice left.

Here we need ask not only "Can the church survive?" but also "Can institutionalized science survive?" If the undergirding values are purely subjective, will not the dominant institutional reality be "administered science," a quintessentially instrumental undertaking already grown large in our midst?

Science contributed to the values of the modern world. Enlightenment thinkers may have challenged institutions; they were, for the most part, certain about foundations. Now the foundations seem to be crumbling with the institutions. In undermining the legitimacy of institutions through the separation of "ought" and "is" (David Hume and Immanuel Kant) modern science first established a domain for its unhindered pursuit, then expanded that domain to include all human affairs only to find that the weapons which had crumbled the foundations of inherited institutions now were destroying its own. In the transformation of substantive into instrumental reason the Age of Reason became the Age of Unreason.

Or is there another possibility?

It seems to me that, broadening one's perspective from the West, with which Robertson is preoccupied, to the planet, one can discern options.

We have on the one hand militarism, the dinosaur of the age of instrumental reason. We observe the proliferation of "garrison states," the repressive domination of the heavily armed in the name of a variety of clashing creeds. Unfortunately the complex of militarized societies, including our own, will not self-destruct without taking most of us with it.

We may discern on the other hand the beginnings of a genuine global civilization, a human ecumenism of a humane kind that understands that all humankind belongs together. In many strange ways we are breaking through to the undergirding of global community.

Let me mention three signs—none necessarily enjoying the "authority" for which Robertson is looking, yet all of them finding loyal adherents.

First, the increasing public concern with and commitment to human rights across ideological frontiers, pointing to an international consensus on certain human values even while all previous structures of legitimation have collapsed. The supporters of Amnesty International know what they want, even without elaborate metaphysical justification (charter 77 and many others).

Second, the development of public and private networks of concern and collaboration. Through many of the specialized agencies of the United Nations, through structures of international relief and lobbying—for whales or elephants, for refugees or for orphaned children—we see concern for global

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survival grow. We are witnessing the creation of a cadre of international civil servants, men and women already at work on international assignments, with an increasingly global commitment.

Finally there are the beginnings of dialogue among the great communities of faith, quietly but determinedly. We may discover legitimacy—even transcendent legitimacy—for a plurality of human communities living in mutuality with one another.

We need to lift our eyes from the communities of the West and look beyond them. We need to ask—as Robertson has not asked—what role science has, what role the religions play, what role the arts will discover in forging an understanding of the complex unity which is this planet, a unity to which science already can testify. Perhaps the disintegration of the substantive values of the West is but a prelude to the affirmation of more universal values.

How they shall be legitimated then becomes the pressing question. While Robertson has directed himself principally to the past, he has raised crucial questions for the future.

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