

GOETZ BRIEFS

Some Observations on Social Tensions

It took two world wars and a depression of devastating sweep to shake the traditional pattern of international policies as well as of social relations within industrialized nations. Both the wars and the depression originated and were focused in what we call Western civilization. It may be rash to say that the supremacy of the West is irretrievably lost; but it is a simple statement of fact that it is no longer unrivaled. It may be an overstatement to say that the traditional pattern of social relations is a matter of the past; but it is, again, only a statement of fact that it is in a process of tremendous fermentation and change. There is a tempting analogy, obsessing the minds of many people, that, as the earthquake of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars fostered the ascendancy of the middle classes over the former ruling classes, so the world wars and the depression herald the ascendancy of something which is called ›Labor‹ over the middle classes. If we call the advent of ›Capital‹ during the 19th Century the era of capitalism, the idea suggests itself that something like the rise of Laborism is in the offing. Laborism, then, would characterize a type of economic society where labor replaces the rights and claims of the capitalist owners, including management. In the laborist society it would be the function of labor to organize, direct and control production, with one exclusive aim in mind, that the returns of production had to go to ›labor‹.

With the faith in the laborist society (what commonly is called syndicalism, Socialism or Communism) goes the connotation that such a society is vastly superior to the capitalist society. Wasteful competition and the limits drawn to production by private property in the means of production would be abolished. A degree of economic and social rationality would be attained such as no other society had ever achieved. Moreover, social conflicts would disappear; all strata in the laborist society would be one happy, cooperative collectivity, inspired by noble emotions and freed from greed. Domestic as well als peace among nations would be within reach; for the first time in human history Mankind would be a reality. It is true that Utopian ideas and

wish-dreams that went with the laborist philosophy of former generations, are no longer *al fresco*. True, however, too, it is that hopes and expectations are pinned to the transformation of present-day society, which are still deeply permeated with Utopian flavor. There is something of the dream of selfsalvation of man in all the eagerness to replace traditional institutions by new ones; a secularist pelagianism is one of the foremost ideological drives. It is, by its very nature, ambivalent; it may be useful, and it may lead to disaster.

It would be surprising if it were otherwise. To a large extent, the social ideas of our time are the ripples following the great groundswell which, starting from the end of the Renaissance, rose to the heights of the Enlightenment philosophy which predicted the advent of Reason, the innate kindness of man, the harmonious society and the final Salvation of Mankind. What actually happened in this rising tide of rationalistic humanism was a transcription of certain theological and religious notions on which occidental mankind had been reared for over a millenium; the basic notions were the ones of man's Fall and Redemption. With the secularization of the Western mind, the categorical imprint which a millennium of christianity had made on it, transcribed Fall and Redemption into the secular sphere. The fall supposedly occured because of some institutions that, at one time or another, developed in the history of man. To the Marxist, such an institution was private property; to old-style liberals it was the monarchy, the aristocracy, or religion, etc. To the anarchist, it was the rise of the State. The abolition of these institutions, it was assumed, would re-establish man in his good nature and would give human reason full sway. Salvation thus was supposed to hinge on emancipation from historical institutions. In this sense it may be said that a good deal of social philosophies, rampant from the middle of the 18th Century on, were just theologoumena. Marxism certainly, with some of its basic notions and ideas, belongs to the category of theologoumena; fall and redemption, and a messianic hope, all in secular transcription, are basic categories in Marxist thought and have gained wide acceptance beyond the confines of Marxism.

It is this train of thought, ideas and expectations which obscures a truly realistic interpretation and approach to the political and social problems of our time. It contributes the particular element of irrealism which accompanies almost always otherwise perhaps reasonable and rational aspirations of social and political groups. There is undoubtedly sufficient ground for tension and frustration in our time; and a

good deal of reform measures and changes are fully advised and inescapable. With all that, however, goes frequently a naive belief that full justice can be done only if certain institutions are abolished, or certain measures taken; that tensions and frustrations can be made to disappear. If ever an era was charged with tension, disharmonies and frustrations, straight through its horizontal and vertical extension, it is our time. Social tensions and conflicts of former centuries were localized; today, they stretch over the whole expanse and depth of modern societies. Here now is our thesis: that a very great deal of tensions, frustrations and conflicts root in the belief that man or mankind has not yet »come into his or its own« because certain institutions prevent him or it from so doing.

Professor *Rudolph Allers* (in a paper read at the 10th Columbia University Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion) took issue with this situation. According to him, ignorance is one of the main obstacles of mutual and social understanding. Education can diminish this ignorance. Education, however, must extend beyond youth because there are the masses of uninstructed adults who may do more harm than the younger generation will ever be able to undo. Analyzing the causes of failing social understanding, Dr. *Allers* finds three of them. There is, first, the prevailing belief that »everyone has to think as I do and that my interests are to be considered before anything else«. There is, secondly, the notion that »the Utopian millennium« is around the corner and that it would become reality were it not for the egotism, the lust for power and the unwillingness to make any sacrifices – »on the part of others«. A good deal of unrealistic dreams goes with this expectation of the millennium. The »human situation« however, fundamentally, is not such that tensions can be altogether eliminated, or security absolutely ensured. There is, thirdly, the attitude of subjectivism which, for some centuries, has been deeply ingrained in the Western mind. The world has been looked at, approached and valued through the medium of subjectivity, be it through the subjectivity of individuals, of social groups, of a class or of a »chosen nation«.

According to Dr. *Allers* the present situation requires a view and an approach from the objective angle, the realization that world and society are objective structures. Man lives in an environment (*Umwelt*) which is meaningful, in an ordered cosmos at least capable of being understood. Understanding a person, a group, a collectivity, their behaviour and attitudes, requires, in the first place, an under-

standing of the world they inhabit. The nature of their world is primarily a context of significance and hence of values. Dr. *Allers* states that there is insufficient evidence for the assumption that tension and aggressiveness derive from frustration; there are frustrated people with the response of aggressiveness; and there are, perhaps a majority of frustrated people, who show no such response. According to Dr. *Allers*, the idea of eliminating frustration »is as utopian as that of eliminating tension«. Then he continues: »A life without frustration is not to be imagined otherwise than as a fanciful dream. Reality is different. Frustration pertains to the very nature of the human situation. Frustration is neither an injustice done to a human person, nor is it an encroachment of the person's freedom. There is no reason why man should do as he pleases.« This perverted interpretation of liberty, too, is related to subjectivism.

The same perverted interpretation is caused by the prominence accorded to the »scientific approach«. It is by far not true that science, as so many people believe, is the only efficient means towards understanding and mastering reality; the immense number of books on how to master this or that problem or difficulty proceeds in technical terms – believing that there are techniques to handle such problems and difficulties. This, by the way, holds true also for a good deal of our literature on industrial relations. At any rate, Dr. *Allers* finds it not uninteresting that there is no treatise on »how to be charitable« or »how to lead a moral life«. According to the same author, the problems of tension, frustration and others of a similar kind must be approached with the understanding that »elimination is, under all conditions whatsoever, merely Utopian«. The human situation simply does not permit it. The problem, realistically approached, can only be a problem of diminishing tensions, frustrations and conflicts. There may be inevitable tensions between individuals and groups; but by no means all of those that exist in our time are inevitable.

To find the evitable ones is not a matter of apriori doctrine; it is primarily a question of empirical analysis. »All doctrines on the amount of tension which is to be considered as tolerable or as inevitable, are based on certain conceptions of what an ideal state of human affairs should be. In fact, it would seem that the tolerability of tensions is not to be determined in any objective terms, least of all by some sort of quantification, but depends on the relation obtaining between the actual state of affairs and that which can be imagined as an improvement on the present state.« Unhappiness and dissatisfaction

crop up when a real, existing state is measured by an imaginable state. In the face of the inevitability of tensions and frustrations, there remains only one truly relevant question: »When are frustrations and tensions legitimate?« Therewith the problem is in the final analysis an ethical one. Here, however, lies the greatest loss of modern man: he has been deprived of his sense of morality – »without receiving anything to replace it«. The world of man has always been full of tensions, frustrations, conflicts; but man had »at least a reliable standard in morals by which to gauge things. He knew what was right and what was wrong. He does not know it any longer«.

The significance of Dr. *Aller's* observations for our problem of industrial relations is obvious. Let us state at once that there are legitimate tensions and frustrations. However, they are not by any means the whole story. A good deal of the universal feeling of tension, frustration and disharmony derives from the three ideas and attitudes which handicap understanding between individuals and groups. There is the ideal that »my« or »our« interests have priority over other people's or groups interests. This is perhaps the most widely held and least reflected attitude. As our era is the aftermath of an era in which self-interests were assumed to be the best promoters of the Wealth of Nations, it is quite understandable that we are confronted here with a lag of consciousness; or that we apply a doctrine, which made some sense in a competitive economy of small owners and with only a fringe of wage-earners, unreflectedly and uncritically in an era of economic and social power blocks.

There is the further idea that the millennium is around the corner and that only ill will or inertia, or lust for power – of other groups – prevent the full realization of Utopia. To be sure, the Utopias of our time seem to be more realistic than those of older times; but all of them accept uncritically the idea of human progress, of the fullness of justice, of equality and so on. The mere consideration of the possibility of a downward trend, or of a catastrophic turn of human history is utterly alien to the prevailing trend of thought, in spite of the catastrophes so fresh in our memory or shaping up before our very eyes.

Finally, the attitude of subjectivism has its manifold expressions in the emphasis on group rights, group interests and group priorities. Recognition and careful weighing of the rights, interests and priorities of other groups is certainly not the order of the day; all groups are rather inclined to the naive assumption that what is good for them must be good for everybody else. If it is not, well that's too bad for

the other fellow. Frequently, the need for compromise is denied and the claims are backed by power, political or otherwise. They often assume the force of punctations: »This is our list of demands. Agree, or else.« The tremendous power at the hands of social groups, filled with the bitterness, often justified, of previous frustrations and oppressions, under leadership not always wise enough to use their power discriminately, equally often not conscious of the destructive consequence of this power on the social organism, is one of the most ominous facts of our time. Even governments representing powerful social and economic organisations may find themselves unable to check or direct the very powers whom they represent, or to conciliate the struggle among the various power blocks themselves.

There is no reason to be surprised about this state of affairs. It should belong to the wisdom handed down to us from the days of *Aristotle*. The breakdown of true humanism which occurred in the leading minds of the 18th century and worked its way into the reality of the 19th and 20th centuries should have prepared us exactly for what happens today. Ours is an era of restiveness in all spheres of life; we have no universally accepted ethical standards to distinguish between legitimate and synthetic restiveness, nor to deal with legitimate tensions, frustrations and disharmonies. Our deepest problem is not to change institutions but the heart and mind of man, and to build institutions which protect truly human standards.

The problem of labor-management relations and – in particular – of managerial responsibilities under the circumstances of our time is closely related to the general state of human conditions and attitudes in our era. It is against the background analyzed above that in particular the problem of managerial responsibilities has to be seen and interpreted.