

“Thinkin’ Rots the Mind!”

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“This rare and brief exercise of their free choice, however important it may be, will not prevent them from gradually losing the faculties of thinking, feeling and acting for themselves, and thus gradually falling below the level of humanity.” – Alexis de Tocqueville

It is not a coincidence that the collapse of Western Civilization is being accompanied by a rampant mindlessness and reptilian reaction to events so contrary to the means by which this culture was created. Civilizations are created by individuals; they are destroyed by collectives. Creative acts do not simply happen, but require energized minds capable of focusing on subject matters often over extended periods of time. The beautiful ancient cathedrals found in Europe – as with the continuing construction of Antoni Gaudi’s Basilica i Temple de la Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, begun in 1882 – are examples of creative undertakings whose completions extend far beyond the lives of both the designers and the workers who participated in bringing them into existence. For creative minds, time preferences matter: the pursuit of a truth may extend not only over one’s life-time, but beyond. Such is the state of mind of those scientists who accept, as part of the learning process, that a theory might, after lengthy research, be disproven.

Whether Western Civilization can be considered extinct, in a terminal state, or simply on a downhill course, is subject to differing interpretations. Suffice it to say that our culture is beset by rigor mortis, including its organizational systems; its creative vibrancy is gone; it no longer produces the values necessary for its survival; nor does it continue to meet the expectations of those who have embraced its qualities or purposes in benefitting human beings. Clarity in thought or vision that drives men and women to discover or create ways in which human well-being can be advanced, is being sacrificed to political or ideological ends. The Animal Farm mantra “four legs good, two legs bad,” has been transformed into divisive slogans such as “black lives matter,” and an insistence upon a multitude of subdivided gender identities.

Once a culture becomes thoroughly politicized, most people come to believe that the most effective means of human action necessitates the use of threats and violence. This represents the essence of all political systems, distinguished from the peaceful and voluntary methods of non-political social systems. It is the mind that is the battlefield for this contest. Only individuals can think; collectives react. Reasoned analysis and long-term commitments to problem-solving or projects take too long, and the skills for employing such methods may atrophy from diminished use. Civilizations are sustained only by maintaining respect for the inviolability of the individual and his or her interests, the conditions that were essential for the creation of cultures. They begin to collapse into divisive and undifferentiated collectives wherein autonomous individuality is transformed into group identities and purposes, with human energies and resources subject to centralized, coercive direction. Violence and other dehumanizing behavior give a false impression of liveliness and resiliency to the destabilizing forces of change.

With the remains of Western Civilization now intermingling with the flotsam and jetsam of prior cultures, the few thoughtful minds that remain have begun to ask about the future of mankind. Will our species, once driven by creative, life-sustaining intelligence, become little more than the muddled debris produced by an implosive disaster, or might it play out the recovery envisioned by Albert Jay Nock wherein a “Remnant” of men and women could help restore the conditions, principles, and practices upon which peaceful and civilized behavior depends?

Judging from early returns from the larger precincts – mainstream media, academia, and the corporate state – it would appear that the reptilian-brained creatures whose reactive, violent impulses contributed so much to the collective madness continue to dominate what remains of civil society.

As the brain and its creative mind are what most distinguishes the human species from other life forms, it is evident that there may be an incompatibility between individualized and collective purposes. Because thinking is unavoidably an individual, personally-controlled activity, the ends and actions of millions of human beings generate diverse patterns of human behavior. This truth is most clearly seen in marketplace transactions grounded upon voluntariness and mutual respect for the inviolability of each other's interests. Who is entitled to make decisions about what in such a setting is determined by identifying the owner of property involved – including ownership of individuals – and by looking to contracts that have been entered into by owners.

In contrast, collective systems are premised on obedience to uniformities of thought and action, prescribed and coercively enforced by vertically-structured authorities. Individually-directed organizations that generate horizontal networks in service to diverse interests, are inconsistent with the uniformities upon which collectives depend to maintain their monopolies over human behavior. Epistemological anarchy, in which individuals are free to think, speak, ask questions, and communicate with one another, disrupt the invariability necessary to maintain established interests and systems. In order to overcome this incompatibility, large, collective systems have created the political state, which has been invested with a legal monopoly on the use of violence to enforce their collective interests.

The institutionalization of force can only be accomplished with the acceptance of such an arrangement by those to be ruled. School systems operate on the vertically-grounded assumption that teachers are well suited for instructing their young conscripts in the necessity for institutionalized rule. The state, the mainstream media, and business corporations all propagandize this premise because it is to their self-interests to deal with humanity on a collective basis. The increased transaction costs of having to satisfy the preferences of millions of individuals – a necessary element in defining human liberty – leads collectivized minds to accept coercing the recalcitrant into bearing the costs for “benefits” they do not choose to receive.

Whether one chooses to become or remain subservient to collectivized systems depends upon individual thinking, whose nature tends to be destabilizing. Thinking produces questions which, in turn, generate a myriad of answers and variations on existing systems and practices. Most dangerous to the established order, questions can create an endless flow of more questions. As my favorite professor of anything, Malcolm Sharp, constantly reminded us, knowledge of any subject matter – be it law, economics, history, or even flower arranging – requires an ever deeper and sophisticated exploration of questions rather than answers to superficial questions. As Milton Mayer so well expressed the point, “the questions that can be answered aren't worth asking.”

Those who seek to advance their interests by controlling the actions or lives of others, find it important to establish the role of keeper of the questions that will be permitted to be asked. This function involves setting the boundaries not only of the questions allowed to be asked, but of the words to be used in ordinary discourse. Even small children often find their parents annoyed by the frequent use of my favorite word, “why?”, a word so useful in helping to define meanings, as well as to make distinctions with other words or concepts. As they move on to grade school, children who persist in asking questions are often labeled “hyperactive,” or suffering from “attention deficit disorder,” for which drugs are often prescribed to enforce obedience to the teacher's agenda. As they become older and move into adulthood, such persons discover the range of their permitted questions and opinions constrained by campus speech codes; the enforcement of “politically-correct” language; censorship of Internet communications by Internet Service Providers; the

powers of judges to hold speakers in contempt of court; and numerous other settings in which individuals are not allowed to freely question or speak their minds.

Conditioned thinking cannot always be depended upon to maintain the uniformities of thought and behavior that are of central importance to institutional systems. The uncertainties of a complex world – including the human mind – make the outcomes of our actions unpredictable. In an effort to overcome the uniqueness and independent nature of the individual, the institutional order has turned to robots which, it is believed, can be programmed to faithfully serve systemic needs. But the content of such programming – being devised by humans – suffers from the same shortcomings associated with trying to make predictions in a complex environment.

The values, concepts, and practices that harmonize relationships among men and women in society and, as a consequence, help to sustain a relatively peaceful and productive culture, seem to be favored by most individuals. Whatever level of conscious understanding most people have of the causal factors that produced the economic dislocations, social conflicts, runaway prices of healthcare and college tuitions, and other adverse effects of centralized authority; there is at least an unconscious awareness of the destructive nature of the institutional order. Richard Weaver's reminder that "ideas have consequence" may underlie the "populist" political movements that have recently arisen in America, Australia, some European nations, and other segments of the erstwhile Western Civilization. Civilizations are impossible to evaluate in purely quantitative ways, but are measured – as Emerson advised – by "the kind of man the country turns out." Voltaire added that the truly creative individuals – and, as a consequence, civilizations – are to be judged "by his questions rather than by his answers."

What remains of Western Civilization cannot withstand either the search for answers or the reciting of questions that are grounded in the same assumptions whose destructive, dehumanizing consequences continue to be played out. When thinking is not informed by reason, science-based validation, and spiritual and emotional standards, people are able to believe in anything. Political decision-making has, for too many decades, relied on public opinion polls as substitutes for the hard and disciplined work of intellectually-informed opinions. What passes for "learning" on too many college campuses – among even the more highly respected institutions – has lately resorted to bullying and violence to keep both students and the established order from the destabilizing effect of ideas that lay too great a burden on the mind. At a number of schools, students have openly condemned the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, and the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, on the grounds that such periods were the products of white, European males and, therefore, racist and sexist in nature!

And why would you expect otherwise? These influences – which help to define the essence of Western Civilization – were the products of individual thought and action, not collective mass-mindedness. Historian Hajo Holborn got to the core of the phenomenon in observing that "Civilization comprises all the spontaneous human activities from the making of a material living to the ideal creations of art, poetry, and universal contemplation." Arnold Toynbee attributed the genesis of such cultures to "creative power in the souls of creative individuals," while Wilhelm von Humboldt declared that such civilized periods depended upon "human development in its richest diversity." Will and Ariel Durant emphasized that the health of a civilization depends upon "creative individuals . . . capable of effective responses to new situations."

But creativity that challenges the boundaries of institution-serving systems is repugnant to the stabilizing interests of the established order and must, therefore, be opposed. Schools have long been the hotbed for conditioning minds in the virtues and necessity for group-think. In the words of Ivan Illich, "School is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is." Rather than helping students learn how to think, traditional teaching skills have focused on inculcating what to think, using such methods as memorization, outlines, standardized testing, mechanical repetition, and other forms of rote learning.

It should surprise no thoughtful person to discover that, as Western Civilization goes through its terminal state, so many men and women are unable to respond with intelligent questioning. With minds so long anesthetized by opinion polls, bumper-sticker slogans, censorship, and other substitutes for rational, empirically analyzed, and spiritually grounded thinking, one would expect to see the true believers in the ideologies of state power return with proposals to solve every social problem – whether real or imagined. The more disordered the consequences of centralized power, the more insistent statist are for placing as much coercive authority in the hands of people like themselves, over the lives of others! If you doubt this to be so, please provide me with the name of any current collectivist politician who favors the decentralization of state power, or who would defend the individual from the collective!



With the 2020 presidential circus arising, the true believers in the ideologies of collective power once again loose upon a dupable public a gaggle of nearly two dozen men and women who share an ignorance of history as well as an economic illiteracy. Those whose intellects rise no higher than to mouth empty bromides or engage in name-calling, find a faux intellectual respectability in such socialistic sloganeering as “justice,” “fairness,” “equality,” and “free” goods and services of every stripe. With so many candidates appearing from the left bird of prey, I suspect there will be a determined effort from some to advocate ever more absurd positions designed to grab the attentions of the millions who comprise the boobeisie, and are eager to associate themselves with even more absurd groupings. Perhaps we shall see the resurrection of the Luddites, who arose during the Industrial Revolution to engage in machine-breaking riots in factories that were alleged to be located in the bowels of hell. The leading entertainment from among the Democrats – the twentiesh-aged congresswoman from New York, AO-C – might find this a suitable shtick, given her video-taped confusion re the workings of a garbage-disposal [see Karen DeCoster’s recent LRC blog]! We might also be hearing from a candidate who proposes to reform the Federal Reserve by promising to appoint someone who would use a Ouija Board to set monetary policies!

Intelligent minds whose understanding of the world has been informed by questions – rather than soothed by superficial answers – will object to such socialist utopian schemes by reminding others of the miseries visited upon the people of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, Zimbabwe, Maoist China, Venezuela, among others. To the reminders of the dehumanizing nature of these socialist systems, we will hear the promise “this time for sure.” Those who offer reasoned, factually-based analyses to these systemic collective rackets will be condemned by the collectivists with the meager name-calling projectiles held in the quivers fashioned long ago on school playgrounds. Those who inform their judgments with understanding fashioned by sophisticated questioning, will find their critiques attacked by most politicians, media voices, and others. Intelligent discussions will not be had with empty minds whose opinions rise no higher than labeling those who ask questions as “racists,” “sexists,” “homophobes,” “white supremacists,” “Islamophobes,” or the most recent slur du jour.

New slanders and name-calling emerge on a daily basis from the collectivist thesaurus: to the charge of “white supremacist” has been added “white privilege,” “toxic masculinity,” “toxic whiteness,” and “individualism;” the latter presumably arising from a preference for the power-hungry to divide the human species into separate ego-identity groupings. Those who desire to protect themselves, their children, and grandchildren from the collective insanity of the modern culture, can walk away from the collective mindset and rediscover the only setting in which peaceful, creative thinking – and with it, civilized society – can ever occur: the energized individual mind!

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About the Author

Butler Shaffer, Professor of Law Emeritus, Southwestern Law School, B.S., Law, 1958 and B.A., Arts and Sciences, 1959, University of Nebraska, Lincoln; J.D., 1961, University of Chicago; Member, Colorado and Nebraska State Bars.

"The reasoning and analytical skills that Butler Shaffer developed in law school where he served as associate editor of the law review, have helped him pursue "the continuous process of inquiry that Socrates referred to as 'the examined life.'"

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