

The Anti-Institutional Mood

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While this article makes frequent references to the current American scene, its intellectual background is European, more particularly recent developments in the social sciences in Europe. The intellectual correlate of the "anti-institutional mood" described by Anton Zijderveld has been a "left wave" in social and political thought throughout Western Europe. In sociology, for instance, this has brought to prominence the so-called Frankfurt School in Western Germany and such neo-Marxist thinkers as Paul Althusser and Henri Lefebvre in France. Adamantly set against this "left wave" has been the German philosopher and sociologist Arnold Gehlen.

*In a series of highly influential works, especially *Der Mensch und Urmensch und Spaetkultur* (Man and Early Man and Later Culture), Gehlen first developed a theory of institutions, basing itself on philosophical anthropology and human biology, then undertook a comprehensive analysis of modern society (especially in *Die Seele des Menschen im technischen Zeitalter—The Soul of Man in the Technical Age*) in which the latter is characterized in terms of the weakening of the institutional structure. Particularly in his recent work, Gehlen has employed this intellectual instrumentarium in a massive assault on the "left wave" in European social thought and in defense of a staunchly conservative position.*

Zijderveld, as he acknowledges here, is deeply indebted to Gehlen. What makes his contribution important, however, is that Zijderveld uses the same approach in affirmation of the institutions of liberal democracy. By combining Gehlen's theory of institutions and the Marxist conception of alienation in a sharply original way, Zijderveld seeks to lay an intellectual foundation for a political stance that will integrate the call for "law and order" with the quest for "liberation."

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One of the strangest paradoxes of modern man, often reflected upon by various social commentators, is the fact that he seems to be infinitely malleable under the pressures of his institutional environment while at the same time he is constantly rebelling against it. The easiest solution of the paradox is to divide modern men into two categories, those who rebel and those who conform. Usually this split is additionally dramatized by identifying the rebels with the younger generation, while people roughly above thirty years of age are considered members of the "establishment." Since the latter is morally compromising nowadays, not a few members of the "older" generation try to pass as youngsters or adolescents, adjusting to the clothes, manners, musical tastes, linguistic jargon and political argot typical of various youth groups and their sub- or countercultures. This suggests that much of

the protest against the "establishment" is essentially rooted in a fundamental desire to conform. Somehow protest and conformity are intrinsically related, despite the many strong suggestions to the contrary. I shall here try to lay bare some of the connections between the anti-institutional mood of protest and the seemingly opposed attitude of adjustment and conformity.

If we characterize the fifties roughly (and thus inadequately) as a relatively quiet decade in which protest remained not much more than a rumble in some corners of the social structure, we may call the sixties a decade of protest and discontent. It is not necessary to call back to memory the events on burning streets, on campuses and in courthouses. In *The Abstract Society* (1970) I made an attempt to describe and analyze these events in general terms, transcending the historical boundaries of this decade.

As I saw it, the sixties demonstrated a "spirit of protest" which, beyond the rejection of particular socio-economic circumstances (racism, poverty, unemployment, etc.) and particular political events (the war in Indochina in the first place), pointed to a fundamental dissatisfaction with the conditions presented by modern technological and bureaucratic society. I tried to analyze a general cultural discontent directed against a society which, because of its incredible structural pluralism, had become increasingly nonunderstandable. I meant "nonunderstandable" not so much in cognitive terms (although the modern social sciences could offer some help—which they, on the whole, regretfully do not) as in terms of experience of meaning, reality and freedom. That is, *in the experience of modern man—whether young or old, poor or rich—modern society appears as a meaningless, abstract superstructure.* Going beyond the empirical analyses of modern society provided by various economic, sociological and political studies, I tried in my book to arrive at a cultural analysis of our time.

It has become abundantly clear during the past decade that modern man does not just passively endure this abstract condition. He searches restlessly for new experiences of freedom, meaning and reality. Not surprisingly, this search, which is at bottom a religious search, became very manifest among those who have as yet little at stake in society at large, namely, middle-class youngsters, students and racial minorities. In various experiments of alternative living and in an assessment of political activities, the spirit of protest has been aired—usually observed by the rest of society with interest, and at times abhorred with fear and/or rage. This spirit of protest assumed many forms of expression and has coined several not altogether original ideologies. In my book I have constructed three ideal types of protest: Gnosticism (search for meaning "inside," stimulated by drugs); Anarchism (search for meaning in "nature," rejecting technological institutional orders); and Activism (search for meaning in political radicalism, employing various strategies of confrontation and using rather dogmatic political ideologies).

Although they result from rather different motives, these three types share a deeply rooted discontent concerning the *institutional* structure of modern society. That is, the institutions of modern society are generally viewed as alienating structures which limit the individual's freedom and deprive him of his sense of reality and meaning, leaving him in an abstract limbo which cannot produce any clear sense of identity. If one strips off various ideological frostings for the sake of the argument, there remains an *anti-institutional mood* which, for different, often contradictory reasons, rejects the social control exerted by traditional institutions. In sum, prevalent in the

anti-institutional mood of modern man is the notion that he would be a fuller man if he were not controlled by the existing institutions. This is just a small step from the belief that man would be more human if he were not controlled by *any* institutions.

The term "institution" is used here in a somewhat broader sense than is usual in American sociology. An institution is defined as a traditional pattern of behavior which has existed before the individual was born and probably will continue to exist long after he has died. It imposes on the individual norms and values which transcend his own existence. Although he can always say "no" to a particular institution, he will never be able to survive without *any* institutions. Arnold Gehlen, whose theory of institutions is utilized here, has stated cogently that man is a being that possesses only a few uncoordinated instincts. Rather than being conditioned by hereditary instincts, man follows historically grown institutions which help him to act semi-instinctively and automatically, without permanently reflecting upon every single act or thought.

Our modern traffic is a good example. It is an institution which enables us to move fast without reflecting at every single corner about our own movements and those of other drivers. In fact, our traffic behavior is institutionalized to such an extent that we can listen to the radio or talk with a friend while driving the car. Indeed, the taken-for-grantedness of institutional behavior enables man to design new actions and thoughts while actually thinking and acting. In other words, institutions have a relieving function, since questions as to the how and why of behavior are suspended, and they make it possible for man to refine and further extend his thoughts, actions and emotions. Above all, however, they shield him from the chaos of uncoordinated impulses. A man without institutions is like an animal without instincts, like a weathercock on a church steeple. He will be utterly helpless and unprepared to encounter adequately the demands of existence. William Thomas described such a man nicely: "He is quite lost and either passively submits to the unexpected, or aimlessly revolts. Such is the position of the animal or the infant in human society." Indeed, the anti-institutional mood, if driven to the ultimate, has always shown itself to be rather animalistic and/or infantile. Thus there are limits to the anti-institutional mood. They are, as Gehlen has shown, biological limits.

When we examine the historical roots of the anti-institutional mood we will discover how this mood entails seeds of conformity and adjustment and may *not* therefore be characterized by the all too simple epithet "revolutionary."

It would testify to historical amnesia if one limited his analysis of the anti-institutional mood to the sixties. The anti-institutional mood can be traced back to the days of Greco-Roman Hellenism (as in

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Sophism and Gnosticism) but has been with Western man in particular since the dawn of modern society—sometimes strong and manifest, at other times latent and not at all prevalent. Of particular importance to our subject are, I think, the Enlightenment of the eighteenth and the Romanticism of the nineteenth century.

In speaking about the paradox of conformity and protest, one would argue far too simplistically if one would identify the Enlightenment with a rational and “realistic” acceptance of the institutional *status quo* and Romanticism with an emotional and “romantic” rejection thereof. In fact, the anti-institutional mood is not at all the exclusive product of nineteenth-century Romanticism but has been produced primarily, although not exclusively, by the Enlightenment. This needs further explication.

In a sense the anti-institutional mood of modern man is indeed a rather emotional and at times irrational attitude which claims that man’s point of gravity lies in his Self, in the abodes of his experience where he remains in touch with “nature,” liberated from the alienating burden of an institutional tradition. This mood was definitely projected by the Enlightenment: Illumined by the “light of reason,” post-Renaissance man rebelled against traditional, still medieval, structures of power and authority, searching for nature inside and outside of himself. Rational man was believed to be natural man, not alienated by inauthentic socio-political structures and above all no longer dominated by the dictates of a religious tradition. Rational man was thus believed to be a free man. This rationalism contained a definitely anti-institutional thrust which, of course, laid the foundations for the French Revolution.

It would also be far too simple to assume that the seemingly contrary attitude of rational acceptance of the *status quo* resulted from a kind of purified rationalism remaining after nonrational elements had been removed from the principles of the Enlightenment. It is of crucial importance to realize that the seemingly rational and “realistic” acceptance of the *status quo* and its traditional institutions arose within the anti-institutional mood itself, as it first came up in the Enlightenment and then unfolded fully in the nineteenth-century Romantic movement. The modern paradox of conformity and protest, and their underlying connections, are to be traced back to this succession of eighteenth-century Rationalism and nineteenth-century Romanticism.

The romantic elements of the Enlightenment are easily forgotten because of the predominantly non-rational and at times irrational thrust of its successor, Romanticism. The latter openly denied its rational heritage and declared war on what now came to be looked upon as “cold rationalism.” As we know, Romantic man was often in search of unadulterated irrationalism, unhampered by rational reflections and floating on unpredictable emotions and experiences. The anti-institutional mood of the Enlightenment had indeed become an irrational attitude of protest. But now something very curious happened within Romanticism itself.

Rejecting the existing institutions as alienating structures, searching for his “true” identity, Romantic man in the nineteenth century did something which Rational man of the Enlightenment would have abhorred: He turned to the past, to tradition, *au recherche du temps perdu*. As G. H. Mead has aptly observed (in *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, 1934), Romantic man discovered his Self, his identity, by going back into the past, by taking the role of an ancient Greek or of medieval man, and by then looking at himself from this perspective. This insight of Mead’s can be fruitfully enlarged. Romantic man does not only alienate himself in history in order to “catch” himself again, he does likewise in his artistic fantasies. This is clearly illustrated by Romantic literature. Mead mentions Sir Walter Scott’s novels about medieval heroism and valor, but we could add nonhistorical novels as well. A famous example is Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), which had a great influence on Romantic literature. It makes sense to dwell upon the typically Romantic contents of this novel.

In protest against the daily routines of his society, young Crusoe takes off one day and, after having endured many adventures, ends up on his famous uninhabited island. Here he has to create his own society and civilization—*ex nihilo*, as it were. Understandably he reminisces quite regularly about the good life he could have enjoyed if he had only listened to the warnings of his father and remained at home. The detailed descriptions of Crusoe’s hardships have a function which is typical of the Romantic movement: All kinds of strange and awe-inspiring alternatives to the *status quo* of the readers are presented, not just to entertain them but to give them the opportunity to better understand and appreciate the social conditions they are in. When, at the be-

ginning of the book, Crusoe tells his father about his plans, the latter gives him a long sermon in which he praises the quietness and sobriety of the middle class they have the privilege to belong to. It is worthwhile to quote this passage at some length:

. . . that the middle station of life was calculated for all kinds of enjoyment . . . that this way men went silently and smoothly through the world, and comfortably out of it, not embarrassed with the labours of the hands or of the head, not sold to the life of slavery for daily bread, or harassed with perplexed circumstances, which rob the soul of peace, and the body of rest; . . . but in easy circumstances sliding gently through the world, and sensibly tasting the sweets of living without the bitter, feeling that they are happy, and learning by every day's experience to know it more sensibly.

Later, when deeply in trouble, Crusoe remembers these words and sighs: "Thus we never see the true state of our condition till it is illustrated to us by its contraries; not know how to value what we enjoy, but by the want of it."

One could also point here at the Romantic revival of the old legend of the Wandering Jew which had outspoken anti-Semitic functions in the Middle Ages. In the nineteenth century, however, the Wandering Jew became a sage who had traveled through all ages since Christ and had witnessed many bizarre historical events (cf. Eugene Sue's novel of 1844). Various rather morbid interests in death and ruins and masochistic accounts of unhappy love affairs are also to be interpreted in this vein. Horror stories with an assortment of gruesome killings were in great demand: Edgar Allan Poe's short tales and, above all, Mary Shelley's best-seller, *Frankenstein* (1818). It should be noted that the literary producers of all this excitement were rather fond of complaining about a penetrating and stifling disease—*ennui*. The author of the highly Romantic novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) complained about it at regular intervals.

What do we see here? The Romantic returns to the past in a melancholy search for the *temps perdu* and the bizarre. He dwells emotionally in what is felt as being lost and alien, and he does so in order to receive a vantage point outside himself and from there to look at himself. It is self-alienation for the sake of self-understanding. *Through self-alienation Romantic man hoped to transcend his alienation.*

It would be incorrect, of course, to interpret Romanticism as an altogether emotional and irrational movement. Just as the Enlightenment embodied some nonrational, romantic elements, the Romantic period certainly knew its rational components. Hegel, for example, elevated the principle of self-alienation for the sake of self-understanding to a dialectic method which has been further elaborated in his very complex logic. Only Marx put an end to the Romantic flirtations with alienation. He condemned it straightforwardly.

Against this background one can better understand, I think, the nature and functions of the modern anti-institutional mood. We have witnessed its presence during the sixties, and it is safe to assert that this attitude will be with modern man as long as his society remains abstract. Looking back at the last decade, however, we may perhaps also assert that its anti-institutional mood reached at times a certain ultimate point beyond which only suicide would remain. Rejecting the existing institutions of modern abstract society but not knowing how to replace them, many a protester failed to find any meaning and freedom where he had thought they could be found. The typically Romantic discovery was made by many—that alienation cannot be conquered by rejecting the traditional institutions. It may be expected that this will lead to the recognition that alienation ought to be transcended by actually accepting institutions as the vantage points from which existence becomes meaningfully understandable. We might illustrate this point within the fields of religion and politics.

After they have discovered that they could not find meaning, reality and freedom through the consumption of drugs, many young people today turn to a bewilderingly old-fashioned revivalistic faith in Jesus Christ. It is a highly irrational movement, still far removed from the structures of the Vatican. But who knows what might happen? The Church of Rome is built upon a remarkable combination of tradition, strong authority, rationalism (organization) and irrationalism (mysticism). Is it not possible that many a romantic man in the seventies and eighties will let himself be embraced by this Mother Church, as did Oscar Wilde and other Romantics at the end of the nineteenth century? If *aggiornamento*, with its predominantly intellectualist modernism trying to render the Church of Rome up-to-date and modern, will subside in time, this Church might be the ideal haven for those who have searched in vain for meaning and reality outside the institutions of society.

Modernization, sociologists teach, is a process of differentiation. Functions performed in pre-industrial societies by such institutions as the family or the church are, in the process of modernization, taken over by various specialized institutional sectors which together, although relatively autonomously, assume the tasks and functions of the family and the church. These functions became, so to speak, institutionally segregated. The interesting fact, however, is that in modern society vague ideologies have spread out from these "institutional pockets" in the form of "familism" and vague humanistic religiosity. Not surprisingly, these two go together most of the time. Thus modernization, as sociologists of religion have acknowledged, has not rendered modern man secular but on the contrary rather religious. It is, once again, not a Church-centered orthodox religion but an ideological and rather vague religiosity. This religiosity

ity easily becomes the matrix for all kinds of emotions, running from nationalist feelings (flag-waving Americanism) and sectarian revivalism (the Jesus People) to various sorts of Gnostic searches for truth and meaning within the psyche (psychoanalysis, drug consumption). The point now is, I think, that this vague religiosity, particularly among the younger generations, rests essentially on the neo-romantic anti-institutional mood. If, as I surmised before, this anti-institutional mood will indeed transcend itself and dialectically return to some form of acceptance of institutional control, we might well witness the end of the institutional isolation of the Church.

What does the anti-institutional mood mean in terms of politics? As Tocqueville saw long ago, the most important political product of the Enlightenment has been the contradiction and alternating rise of *egalitarianism* and *totalitarianism*. Here too it is important to realize that totalitarianism is generated by egalitarianism and that both have their origin primarily in the Enlightenment. Ever since the Enlightenment told man to be rationally independent, to depend solely on his own rational abilities, it put dynamite under any form of traditional authority. Or, to put it differently, the Enlightenment taught man to control his own destiny and not to let himself be controlled by traditional authority. Add to this such Romantic feelings as the *liberté, fraternité* and *égalité* of the French Revolution. As has been observed many times, however, this holocaust was followed by Robespierre and Napoleon, as Stalin came almost logically after Lenin.

There is a simple explanation for this sequence of egalitarianism and totalitarianism: When the pressures of an established authority are lifted and people are pronounced equal in principle (which, of course, does not mean that they are equal in reality), an overall struggle for power will ensue, causing the rise of several competing parties. After one party has seized control it will, almost without exception, begin to fight all competing parties, suspending rights "in the name of the revolution" and "for the protection of individual and social interests." Repressive *realpolitik* will set in, establishing forms of domination which, apart from misleading rhetoric, do not differ much from any previous despotism. This will in its turn provoke resistance ("counterrevolution") and again the call for equality will be heard.

As in other matters, the contemporary anti-institutional mood demands *immediate* political results and searches for the "feel" of direct power. In its romantic absolutism it distrusts all institutional mediation, including the parliamentary one. However, as with religion, one could legitimately ask here too if this mood will last in its present manifestation. Is it possible that modern man will realize the need for indirect, delegated power if he is going to maintain the principles of democracy? Is it possible that he might get tired of yelling in a self-created institutional void

and begin to look for forms of political participation *within* the existing system? Indeed, bureaucratized and professionalized abstract society can and does easily cause the misuse of power. It makes it hard at times to maintain the principles of democracy. But, then, on the path of modernization there is hardly a way back. There remains only the task of coping with abstract society consciously and with a strong character. The neo-romantic anti-institutional mood is hardly prepared to face this task. Its emotional call for direct power entails the option for the worst alternative, namely, the abdication of all democracy.

Is it not possible that the political conviction will grow again, as it might grow in religious matters, that man has to lose himself institutionally in order to regain himself? This means in the case of politics that, if there is going to be democracy at all, its aims have to be realized indirectly, through elected representatives and by means of the existing legal system. The rather influential movement of Ralph Nader is a perfect example of this viewpoint. This might be a far more effective and much healthier approach than the usually short-term emotional shocks offered by various "extra-parliamentary" opposition movements.

This is not backlash. We encounter people here who are thoroughly critical about the present national and international state of affairs, who, perhaps for some time, could not believe in their indirect, often hardly observable, power and who at times have been seduced by the lures of an emotional will to power. They discovered, however, that only an institutional void had been created, in which their protest sounded more and more like "the sick shriekings of dying rats" (William James). What first looked like liberation and total commitment gradually appeared to be abdication of all responsibility. Literally everything can be legitimated in the ultimate stage of the anti-institutional mood, from gruesome killings in the name of anticapitalism to petty crimes like the faddish stealing of books and clothes in department stores ("exploit the exploiters"). The killings demonstrate the sickness of the rhetoric used, the petty thefts the small nature of these grand ideologies.

The near future will show if this change of the rather sultry anti-institutional mood to some form of transcendence of alienation will occur and lead to a renewed acceptance of institutional structures. Of course, a continuation of the present polarization between those who call for "law and order" and those who search for "liberation" is also possible. However, if the signs of the time do not deceive us, there is some reason to be optimistic and to hope for a conscious renewal of our democracy. In order to achieve this, man must learn again how to transcend himself and how to keep his anti-institutional mood under control.