

The Death of Meaning

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PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut
London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Zito, George V.

The death of meaning / George V. Zito.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-275-94674-6 (alk. paper)

1. United States—Social conditions—1980- 2. Social change—
United States. 3. Meaning (Philosophy) I. Title.

HN65.Z57 1993

306'.0973—dc20 93-15351

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 93-15351

ISBN: 0-275-94674-6

First published in 1993

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881
An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface

Seventeen years ago I applied for a faculty position at a small, highly reputable Jesuit college in upstate New York. During the interview, the Sociology Department chairman, aware of my background, asked if I would consider teaching a course in population studies, an undergraduate version of my course in demography. I hesitated. "I could do that," I told him, "but you must understand that if I teach that course I will include the various methods of contraception and abortion, and I teach them from a positive standpoint: that is, I am *for* contraception, and I am *for* abortion (as long as it is not simply a redundant method of birth control but a choice of last resort). Will I get into any trouble with your administration or faculty if I teach such things?" The department chair, himself a Jesuit, shook his head. "No," he said, "you'll have complete academic freedom, of course. None of us will object. Parents of some students might object if they hear about it. But we will support you. You have the freedom to teach whatever your conscience dictates."

I was impressed. My maternal grandfather, the man in whose house I had grown up, had been very "anticlerical," and some of his feelings had rubbed off on me in my youth. Having fought in the Italian Unification, he was an antipapist who bemoaned Mussolini's conciliatory agreement with the Pope. He had always

exhibited what I'd considered a healthy antifascist attitude, and the Jesuits, as I remembered them from my youth, were the "Pope's army" and if not fascists, then close to it. It was probably the lack of religious background resulting from my association with my grandfather that finally spurred my interest in religions, and resulted in some publications and conference presentations in the sociology of religion many years later. And resulted, too, in my having formed a lasting friendship with the Jesuit, the aforementioned chairman of that department.

I took the job. I taught the course the way I had said, and there were no grumblings anywhere. A year later I was offered a position at a large secular university with graduate as well as undergraduate programs, so I took that job and there I remain.

What brings the earlier incident to mind is an event that recently happened at this large secular institution. I was teaching an undergraduate course, *Civilization and Society*, that I had originated some years earlier under a foundation grant. The course includes a source book of readings from ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Hebrew, Greek, Roman, Medieval and Renaissance authors. It is structured around the Durkheimian theses on the elementary forms of the religious life. Another shorter text explains different "systems" of social organization, not quite Parsonian, but including the Cultural System and the importance of values within that system. Many of the early readings reflect the religious orientations of their times, and one of the objects of the course is to show the development of a system of values within a civilization as well as the separation of the various institutional structures from the authoritarian charismatic person to the autonomy they have attained within modern bureaucratic social systems.

I had noticed that some of the student papers, when discussing the various gods and goddesses of the ancients, always omitted the *o* in the word *god*. "Zeus was a Greek g-d," I read. It did not take long before I realized that this occurred only with certain Jewish students. I tried explaining this in class one day. "Look," I said, "this has nothing whatever to do with the sacred name of the Hebrew god, Yahweh, which was considered ineffable—not to be written or spoken aloud—among orthodox Jews." I said that when I corrected papers written in English I expected

them to use good English. There was no course requirement that they include the word *god* in any form in their papers for my course, but if they did, they had better spell it correctly or it would be marked wrong.

This created havoc. I received a call from the rabbi of the campus Hillel organization, patiently explaining to me that there was agreement among local congregations about the use of the word *god* and that students are taught in their schools to omit the letter *o* when they write *god* (with or without a capital letter). "That's silly," I told him. "There is nothing special about that English noun. Would they write "d-o" in Italian or "de-s" in Latin? And what happens in German? Would they omit the first or second *t* in *Gott*?" He did not appreciate my sense of humor. "In my classes," I told him, "when students use English words they must spell them correctly. If they don't, they are docked for it, without exception." He objected loudly and vigorously. "I am the professor and you are the rabbi," I told him. "You take care of the religious well-being of your congregation and I will teach them the secular stuff, and they'd better learn it correctly or they are in trouble."

A few days later a Jewish professor who I did not know phoned me and tried to rationalize the rabbi's position. "Tough," I told him. "You and he are interfering with academic freedom here. Either desist or I'll raise hell with AAUP and others. This was all settled way back in the Scopes trial. No religious group is going to dictate how I teach my science." That was the last I heard from him, but not from the administration. A professor in my own department, who has made a career out of being Jewish, complained to the Affirmative Action or Human Resources person, who then tried to convince me that I should tolerate this interference. "Nonsense," I told him. "I did not leave a good position in engineering physics in the real world to surrender my intellectual honesty in academia." When he threatened to inform my dean, I told him he should go ahead and do so.

And there the matter died. But I could not get over the incongruity here. Jews (and there are Jewish members of my own family) were always the liberals fighting for freedom of expression, and the Jesuits were the dark secret army working against

social change, the conservatives or reactionaries. Somehow, the world had turned upside down in my lifetime. Christian fundamentalists of all varieties had always been the bad guys when I was growing up, and the Jews were always the good guys. What had happened?

The contradiction encouraged me to look with an even more jaundiced eye at what was happening about me. The scare tactics on campus with respect to rape (for example) had grown all out of proportion, and had resulted in separate camps of women and men not only among the faculty, but among the student body as well. Some groups of women talked about nothing else, and several committees and organizations had been formed to “educate” the rest of us on the matter of rape, as well as “sexual harassment.” Something similar was happening within my own discipline. Women authors had stopped writing about sociology and were writing about “the patriarchal exploitation of women.” That was *all* they were writing about, or most of them. The latest issue of *Contemporary Sociology*, the journal of book reviews published by the American Sociological Association, begins with a long listing of books on “gender.” But these are all written by women. Do only women have genders? I mused. Who reads these books? Other women, I suppose. Books by men in sociology are read by both men and women, but not the “gender” books. This seemed to be on a par with the romance novels in the local drugstore. Harlequin Romances and their imitations are also only bought by women. Is there some connection here we have been missing? I know of no male colleague of mine who reads books of either of these genres. Is what Camille Paglia says true, that so-called Women’s Studies is only institutionalized sexism, drowning our best women students in self-serving anti-intellectual pap?

These and similar musings soon led me to consider what these things must mean to their true believers. Because there are indeed true believers in this stuff. The advent of “political correctness” had suddenly made some of this stuff respectable, no matter how flawed it was in its reasoning or “empathetic feelings.” Added to this, the subjectivism of postmodernism reduced all problems of meaning to anti-epistemological trivia. I tried, in my classes, to explain to students at both levels that post-struc-

turalism and postmodernism were not one and the same, and certainly not in sociology. Sociology had never had a distinctly “modernist” period such as that enjoyed by the Humanities, but we did have a “structuralist” period when Levi-Strauss leaned over from anthropology upon all the social sciences. “Postmodernism,” from within a sociological perspective, is meaningless, I argued.

But then, I thought suddenly, most everything is getting meaningless these days. Is deconstructionism merely one aspect of a possible death of meaning? Is postmodernism? Political correctness? The abandonment of rigorous methodology in favor of gutsy hormonal response? What’s been going on here? Why is the world becoming like a badly written imitation of a Kafka novel?

These are some of the disturbing sources of what follows. Almost everything I have written in my sociology career has had to do with meanings and language. Somehow these are now being threatened, and although it was difficult initially to define exactly where and how, and the point of it all, a modest amount of research yielded seemingly disproportionate results. These results are presented in the following chapters.

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Chapter 1

The Problem

The death of meaning: how can this be? Meanings change, have always changed, if what we mean by meaning is what we find in words, what words convey. The meaning of the word *jazz*, for example, changed from its origins as an off-color word for sexual coupling, to the kind of orgiastic dance signifying such behavior, to the music accompanying such a dance, to music without dance, to “all that jazz”—signifying nothing significant. Successive generations play with words, coin their own jargons to convince themselves that they are different from past generations, that “something is happening” and it’s happening now, for them, the latest and the truest. That is nothing new. But meaning *itself* die? In the sense that meaning *itself* is disappearing? And not just the meanings of particular words? Can an argument be made for this seemingly outlandish idea? I believe it can. Most of us are aware that something of this sort has been happening for some time, but we haven’t been able to put a finger on it. Nevertheless, in the series of essays that follow I hope to show that, although the death of God was announced early in the century and the death of Man midway through the century, both obituaries were misguided; here at the century’s end it is clear that it is meaning that is disappearing—not just changing—that meaning itself is coming to an end, and in a certain way what

Nietzsche was talking about earlier and what Foucault¹ and others were talking about more recently is really the demise of meaning itself, both God and Man being manifestations of a deeper structure of language now in the process of decay.

In the course of the following essays we will examine various kinds of empirical evidence to suggest that what we unthinkingly refer to as “meaning” has been disappearing since early in the twentieth century. To understand what has been happening it will not be sufficient to merely give empirical examples of current situations, current activities: for at most these could be taken as signifying only a *change*, not the death, of meanings. And since we often (if mistakenly) assume that change is always positive and, therefore, that we are making progress as a society (as a nation, a group, or humanity itself), change is almost always welcomed. This well-known “myth of progress” has been attacked by philosophers and social theorists from Karl Marx through Karl Mannheim, by phenomenologists and existentialists alike, but it still persists, particularly among fervent disciples of popular ideologies. It will not be within the task of these essays to attempt to disprove once more the premise that any change is necessarily for the good, or represents progress: there are sources abundant for disproving that. To those emotionally committed to such a notion, however, all proofs are unconvincing, while to those who already understand, no further proof is required. This book is not intended for those who insist, like *Candide*, that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds; it is intended for those who already have doubts about where we are going and why, although not (perhaps) so fervently imbued with the desire to believe that they can somehow stop the process—it appears that it has already gone too far for us to stop it—but to further understand it and somehow come to terms with it. Certainly, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the meaningless inter-ethnic savagery that resulted in the Balkans and elsewhere shows that the decline of meaning is not limited to the United States, but is endemic in the world. And there are, I am convinced, people in this world who feel quite passionately about attempting to understand the social construction within which they live and move and have their being and yet have had little if any hand in creating, in bringing into existence. The

magnitude of this passion and the resulting confusion caused by the collapse of meaning only exacerbates their problem. By being born into a society and born into a language we become unwilling prisoners of language and society: it is not, necessarily, that such a thing as "free will" does not exist; but it has limits imposed by language and society that we often fail to take into account, particularly in sociology, psychology, and the other "human sciences." These limits serve contradictory ends: on the one hand, they impose restrictions on what may be said, written, published, or otherwise examined, as Foucault points out in his "Discourse on Language" and as Thomas Szasz, Ron Leifer and Ernest Becker discovered as early as 1962 in Syracuse when they challenged psychiatry's fictional claims to medical status.² On the other hand, these limits make possible the specification of meanings in verbal interactions between persons of the same language community by defining relations among and between related words. Words are defined by other words: that is what dictionaries are for. To master a language is to recognize the syntagmatic rules governing word order and the paradigmatic possibilities of meanings defined by the context in which they are used.

But is it possible to argue that meaning is dying, when the very process of conducting such an argument employs word language, the essential vehicle of meanings? When the words I use and the ways in which I use them have therefore themselves already undergone decay? I believe it is. Some contemporary French social discourses argue that we must restore to discourse its character as an event, while simultaneously maintaining that Man is dying during the event, also assuming this possibility. If we begin by recognizing the tentative nature of the communicative act and the attendant problem of intersubjectivity, the fact that we have taken some further steps down the ladder away from one-to-one mapping of meanings when we write or speak appears only as an additional historical impediment, another break in the possibility of full communication between us: it does not point to the impossibility of your understanding at least in part what it is I intend; it only suggests that communication between us has become increasingly difficult. That this condition is endemic in our world, and particularly in the United States,

does not mean we must withdraw into isolated shells and abandon all attempts at communication.

Death being a more permanent condition than mere change, we must be shown examples of some current conditions that would lead one to conclude that meaning itself is dying, rather than the meanings of particular words changing. Because of the complexity of the situation, some seemingly complicated examples may be given before others more simple, to help us grasp the multifaceted process that is underway. For now we need only notice the continuing shift away from words to pictures (or icons) and reflect that although word systems—languages—are the most complex meaning systems, systems of signs, that we have for communication of complex ideas and discourses, television has largely replaced printed text as the principal source of information and knowledge for most Americans. Demotic language evolved originally *away* from picture languages such as hieroglyphics, and not the other way around. Our current historical movement from demotic language to pictures is therefore a reversal of a long historical process that had prevailed throughout the various cultures of the West.

Many of us have seen in our lifetimes word language media such as newspapers, magazines, and books steadily declining in availability. How many newspapers existed in major American cities fifty years ago? In New York City alone, where are the *Herald Tribune*, *The Sun*, the *World Telegram*, the *New York Journal* and the *Journal American*? Whatever happened to the *New York Mirror*? *PM*? Where are the print media of yesteryear? With books the matter is much the same. At times young listeners are shocked when I describe the Fourth Avenue Booksellers that existed in New York when I was young: “how could they disappear?” they ask. That logocentricity has declined is always a revelation to them. Today, in New York City, for example, not only bookstores like Brentano’s have disappeared but the quasi-scholarly bookstores as well. Dial Books is gone, the Eighth Street bookstores are replaced with fast-food eateries; only Strand and a few others remain. In smaller cities, even university towns, the situation is not much different. The colleges’ own bookstores remain to furnish textbooks for courses, although they have mostly (like Harvard’s Co-op) become oversized department

stores with a dwindling emphasis upon scholarly books. Even the independent, book-lovers' bookstores and the people who operated them, the informal literary mentors of the emerging tastes of many of us still alive, those book dealers who knew books, lived books, breathed books, and socialized several generations to books, have all but disappeared.

The situation is somewhat better in Toronto and other parts of Canada—where literate populations still exist and where it is still possible to buy serious books—but in the United States, even in college towns like Ithaca and Syracuse, Madison and Ann Arbor, most literate book dealers have abandoned all hope as we drive further into a future of iconic receptiveness, in which various varieties of video represent major components. Video rentals have replaced the book rentals of the earlier years; the public libraries have increasingly become the place to borrow free videos rather than free books. In the United States, Boston is among the last to go. Illiteracy in the United States is now higher than in any other Western society and SAT scores, which show students' ability to read and understand the meanings of questions and verbal examples, have dramatically declined; Hirsch's book is only one of many re-countings of some of the implications.³

The German sociologist Georg Simmel, early in the century⁴ discussed what he called "the web of associations" within which individuals were embedded in modern societies, and called particular attention to certain social forms⁵ that are elemental. Such forms as the dyad and the triad (i.e., groups of two and three) he saw as including bonds between and among individuals of a social kind, and typify the "forms of sociation"⁶ that have arisen to serve human life by fostering interaction among individuals, and as a consequence of such interaction making society itself possible. Taken together, such forms constitute an intricate web of connecting links among such individuals, often uniting them into communities of common interests, where the obligations to others are recognized and accepted despite the pluralism that may exist due to differences in cultural backgrounds and personal interests. For Emile Durkheim, the greatest French sociologist, this "web" took the form of a "collective conscience," a kind of group morality where social norms, expectations of what

one ought to do or ought not to do with respect to others, acted as *social facts* and influenced one's actions, although not in a straightforward stimulus-response manner. A social fact for Durkheim meant anything external to the individual that exerted a coercive effect on the individual's behavior. Other social theorists held similar beliefs in their attempts to respond to the age-old questions posed by the philosopher Thomas Hobbes: "How is society possible? Why isn't there a war of all against all?" Somehow people *did* cooperate socially by living in communities and sharing moral and ethical standards, and society, that web of associations among people which existed before they did, continued to exist when they had passed through it and other people had replaced them. There were changes, of course, brought about by the discovery of America, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution. Most social scientists concerned with the historical dimension are quick to point out how world views changed with time: the Great Chain of Being of the Medieval world gave way to the decentered world of Copernicus and then later to Western capitalism, to urbanization and industrialization, to different understandings of the place of religion, of men and women; adolescence came into existence as an intermediary stage in personal development. The old cry of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" got written into laws. Equal justice under the law was given new life and persisted as a universal demand upon government.

But increasingly, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the earlier meaning of "liberty" became simplified and equated with personal "rights." "Equality" changed in meaning to "sameness," and "fraternity" disappeared altogether, suddenly seen as an anachronism of a more revolutionary era and vaguely suspected of being associated with "patriarchy." By fraternity was meant community; but community, except in small ethnic enclaves in ghettos and barrios, had all but disappeared from the American scene. Community, Durkheim had argued, is only possible where there is a collective conscience and social interaction, where citizens share common bonds and interests and increase the "moral density" of an area—not the physical density necessarily but the density of mind and of number and kinds of interactions.⁷ In this sense college fraternities and sororities are