

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

by

HARRY ELMER BARNES

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In An Era of World Upheaval

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SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

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To
FRANK HAMILTON HANKINS

Preface

THIS book attempts to describe and appraise our institutional equipment in a period of far-reaching and unpredictable social change. We are now in the midst of a great world-revolution, comparable only to the dawn of history, the breakup of ancient pagan civilization in the later Roman Empire, and the disintegration of medieval culture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Ours is an even more critical period of cultural transformation because the tempo is far swifter than in any earlier era of change and because the problems of control and adjustment involved are infinitely more complex than they were in simpler agrarian and provincial epochs.

The chief reason why we find ourselves encompassed by world-shaking changes is that our material culture—our science and technology—has moved ahead much more rapidly than the social institutions through which we seek to control and utilize our mechanical facilities. In an era of dynamos, transoceanic clippers, radios, television, and automatic machines we still rely on institutions which had reached maturity in the days of Abraham Lincoln—many of them at the time of George Washington. The social thinking and institutions of the stagecoach era have signally failed to sustain a society which boasts stratosphere airliners.

Classical culture fell because Greek and Roman ideas and institutions—utopian philosophy and imperial politics—got ahead of the limited technology, especially in the realm of transportation. Our culture, on the other hand, is gravely threatened because our machines have moved far beyond our social thinking and institutional patterns. We shall never enjoy any assurance of personal security or international peace until our institutions catch up with our unprecedentedly rich and diversified material culture.

Since the backward state of our institutional heritage is the outstanding cause of the present sorry state of the civilized world, no realistic writer can very well be expected to present a eulogistic or optimistic appraisal of social institutions in our day. He may well pay tribute to any actual virtues in our institutional setup, but he should also be frank and candid in revealing the obvious anachronisms and defects. There is no possibility of achieving essential institutional reforms until we have come to recognize the need for such improvement. The realistic assessment of our institutions set forth in the pages of this book is not offered in a mood of carping criticism but as the indispensable forerunner of changes that must be made if we are to retain our freedom and bring

about security and peace for the mass of mankind. We cannot logically expect people to support reform unless they are made aware that reform is necessary.

The real friends of our American way of life are those who recognize and fearlessly reveal the obvious danger signals that are evident on every side, and who seek to eliminate the threats to our social order while there is yet time and opportunity. The most dangerous enemies we have are not the "crackpots" who peddle cheap and naïve panaceas. Such persons at least recognize that something is wrong, though their remedy may be as bad or worse than the malady itself. The real menace to our civilization is to be found in those who insist on living in a "fools' paradise" of smug conceit and complacency, conducting a sort of "sit-down strike" against intelligence, and insisting that nothing is wrong in this best of all possible worlds. Such adamant smugness inevitably charts the course of society from decadence, through dry rot, to crisis and totalitarianism.

Never was candor more needed than in a period of war and readjustment. Our leaders have proclaimed that they hate war and despise it as a system of international policy, even if we currently have to fight to assure a less unstable and less warlike world in the future. To eulogize war, in itself, as a noble human experience is to lock arms ideologically with Hitler and the Black Dragon minions of the Mikado, and to concede by implication that they are right in their bellicose philosophy. The exigencies of wartime doubtless require a rigor in social control exceeding that which will suffice for peaceful days. But we should make sure that emergency measures are limited to the emergency and are not greater than the emergency requires. There is little to be gained in carrying the Four Freedoms to the Antipodes if we surrender them indefinitely in our own country. Never will informed intelligence be more essential than in the difficult period of post-war readjustment. It will be a poor preparation for that critical era if we are forced to "park" our mentalities for the duration. Cerebration is not something which can be put in mothballs and withdrawn at will.

Since it is quite impossible to understand the nature and current problems of any social institution without a full knowledge of its evolution in the past, much attention is given to the history of each of the institutions discussed in this book. It is hoped that this historical background will not only clarify understanding but will also promote greater tolerance and more constructive thinking. Nothing else is so conducive to urbanity and open-mindedness as historical studies, and no other subject so completely demands these qualities and attitudes as does the study of social institutions. It can safely be said that no other book of its kind in any language provides so ample an historical background for the appraisal of our institutional problems and readjustments.

This book, like all scientific historical and sociological works, is committed to the thesis of cultural determinism. Yet it does not go to the silly extreme of ignoring personal agents in the social process. Capi-

talism, for example, does not operate in a void without personal capitalists, nor does party government function without politicians. But our criticisms and condemnations, if any, are directed against institutions rather than the individuals who merely reflect and execute these institutional trends. However blameworthy a speculating utility magnate, a corrupt politician, a racketeer, or a venal propagandist may be, he is a creature of his time and folkways. It will do little good to denounce or punish him unless we also proceed to alter the institutional patterns which produce such types.

At the outset we seek to make clear how institutions arise from the need for group discipline, which enables man to exploit the all-essential advantages of cooperative effort. We show how the efficiency of institutions is directly related to their ability to serve the needs of a particular type of culture at any given time. When they get out of adjustment with the material basis of life, they decline in efficiency and often prove an obstruction to social well-being. Such is the situation in our day, when cultural lag, or the gulf between our musty and decadent institutions and our dynamic technology, is the outstanding cause of our social problems and perplexities.

Next, we turn to the leading economic institutions of our time—industry, capitalism, and property. The contributions which these have made to human progress and prosperity are fully recognized, while their current deficiencies are frankly indicated, in the hope that the reforms required may be made before the system collapses and collectivism intervenes to apply drastic measures of rehabilitation. Society cannot well tolerate indefinitely the spectacle of mass starvation and deprivation in the midst of potential plenty.

Our treatment of political institutions revolves about the crisis in democracy and liberty in our time. The present framework of our democratic government is supplied by the national state and constitutional government. The national state has grown overburdened and top-heavy as a result of the increasing variety and complexity of the problems with which government has to deal, and it maintains a potent bellicosity which holds over mankind a perpetual threat of war. Constitutions, instead of being regarded as the means to the end of orderly and efficient government, all too frequently become ends in themselves. This situation creates an air of awe and reverence which handicaps all efforts to adjust our governmental machinery to the changing needs of a dynamic society.

Political parties provide the technique of representative government and democracy, but they have a proclivity to develop corrupt and undemocratic trends and to foster inefficiency in governmental action. Party government is remarkably proficient in producing politicians, namely, men who are experts in getting elected and preparing to get reelected. But it is lamentably inefficient and defective in providing us with statesmen, namely, officials who know what to do after they are elected.

Our traditional democracy was formulated and introduced in a simple, agrarian culture, with few political problems and in an era when little scientific knowledge was available about man and society. It was inevitable that such a system of government would be unsuited to exercise political control over an urban, industrial world-civilization. Unless this fact is speedily recognized and the older democracy is revamped in harmony with the social realities of our day and in accord with the teachings of social science, there is little prospect that democratic government can be sustained. The true friends of democracy, then, are those who recognize this challenging fact and seek to reconstruct democratic government while there is an opportunity to do so. Those who stubbornly defend archaic policies and practices are the best friends of the totalitarianism which eagerly waits "just around the corner." Huey Long may well have had a brilliant "hunch" when he suggested that Fascism is likely to come to America in the name of democracy. Most of the really dangerous proto-Fascist organizations in our country flaunt the word "democracy" or "freedom" in their official titles.

Since liberty is one of our main advantages and prizes, as over against the totalitarian way of life, it is especially important that we pay attention to the current crisis in liberty. Our civil liberties were won and catalogued back in the seventeenth century, and we have done lamentably little to extend and buttress them since that era. The middle class or bourgeoisie which fought for them and triumphed is now being challenged, and its long ascendancy over society is passing away. Bureaucracy, begotten of the need for ever greater governmental intervention, is not too solicitous of liberty. Crisis government can rarely be a libertarian government. Never was it more true that we need to exercise that "eternal vigilance" which is the price of an assured liberty.

In our chapters on law we condense and summarize the indictment of our current legal ideas and practices which have been put forward in recent years by progressive lawyers. It is high time that such reforms be executed as will render unsupportable the frequent quip that law has no relation to justice or that lawyers make more litigation than they settle. Denial of justice invites revolt, and there is little "rule of law" in revolutionary or totalitarian régimes. Legal reforms are as much a matter of self-interest on the part of the legal profession as they are a concern of society at large.

Nothing is more novel in our age than the amazing agencies for the communication of information and the many devices for the molding of public opinion. Though propaganda is as old as history—probably older than a written language—the techniques now employed in propaganda are far different from what they were in an era before the daily newspaper, the radio, and the moving pictures. In a democratic society we are especially dependent upon accurate mass information. Misinformation and deliberate distortion by our agencies of communication imperil free government and liberal institutions. The main safeguard

of a liberal democracy is full public knowledge of the devices and methods of propaganda, so that the citizenry may be both informed and forewarned. Censorship is the first step on the road to totalitarian suppression of ideas. We must be on our guard against unnecessary invasions of liberty and the denial of freedom of expression. Censorship is the indispensable tool of the dictator.

In the section on the family and community we describe those changes in society and culture which have undermined the old rural family life and its associated practices and have disrupted most other primary institutions. Suggestions are offered as to how the family might be firmly reconstructed in accord with our new modes of living and could be made to serve our age as well as the traditional rural family of yore met the needs of a simpler life. New forms of community organization are slowly arising to take over the tasks formerly executed by leading primary groups such as the neighborhood, the play group, and the like.

Finally, we treat those institutions which promote richer living among men. The origins of religion are surveyed, its antiquities revealed, and its potential services to contemporary society clearly indicated. Education is presented as the chief hope that we have of guiding society along the path of progress through planned and orderly change rather than by revolution and violence. But education cannot perform this indispensable service unless it recognizes its responsibilities and adopts the attitudes and techniques which these responsibilities logically impose. Quietism and timidity in education only lay the ground for the agitator and the revolutionist. More complete and more realistic instruction in the social sciences is obligatory, if education is to aid in preserving the democratic way of life.

Our machines have provided us with a potential age of security and leisure. Either we shall realize this "dream of the ages" through subduing machines to human service or they will tear our culture asunder and there will be neither leisure nor abundance. If civilization survives, the main task of the future will be the conquest of leisure, thus supplanting the chief problem of the past, which has been the procurement of subsistence through long hours of toil. Recreation and art may provide us with two of the most hopeful modes of leisure-time expression, but we are as yet only on the borderline of an adequate development of either of them as a phase of the daily life of man.

We stand at one of the great turning points in the history of human civilization. Whether we will move ahead to security, peace, and a life worthy of human beings or will revert to barbarism through continued misuse of our unique opportunities and facilities, depends upon our ability to modernize our institutional patterns. If this book helps in some slight degree in promoting institutional reconstruction it will have served its purpose.

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Cooperstown, N. Y.

July 21, 1942

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