

The drive to destroy enlightenment values

[History](#)



The history of wars and revolution is flooded with personalities with almost mythical qualities. The heroes of wars and revolutions declared new social orders based on the principles of justice and public service. These individuals, after their assumption to power and material wealth, declared the supremacy of their respective cultures. In history, this happened many times, as in the case of the Athenian and Roman Empires, the Napoleonic Era, the Holy Roman Empire, and many others. Yet, out of these wars and revolutions, ideologies developed. These ideologies usually offered alternative ways of life, that is, new philosophies for managing civilizations.

However, some ideologies became the background for advancing rationalism and progress. Out of revolutions at the latter part of the 18th century, a general atmosphere of Enlightenment clouded the countries of Europe. This ideology declared the innate greatness of man, his love for liberalism, and his drive towards order and self-regulation. The Enlightenment proposed the idea that man, given his limitations and tendencies to innovate, can achieve freedom by imputing liberal values both in the state and the society. This can be done in two ways. An individual, in association with other individuals can establish a government that promotes liberal ideas. If the state is unresponsive to the waves of liberalism or obstructs its growth, then the only answer is revolution. Here, the term “ revolution” acquires a positive character.

Although the new ideology was borne out of the French Revolution, it was eventually accepted by European monarchs as an alternative way of dealing with their liberal subjects. They saw the Enlightenment as vital to the survival of European civilization and advancement of science and technology.

A civilized way of life can only be maintained so long as the “ spirit of times” matches the needs of the populations. As one will see later, the values advanced by the Enlightenment were threatened by the wars and revolutions of the 20th century.

Because Freud saw man as anti-social and anti-cultural, he assumed that civilization was the product of struggle between the libidinal instinct and social mechanisms for controlling behavior. In history, according to him, some individuals were able to subdue their “ feeling of obedience to social mores” to aggression. Genghis Khan, Emperor Neo, Attila the Hun, and many others were revealed as savage beasts to whom “ the thought of sparing their own kind as alien” (Freud, 1930/1989: 54).

Freud saw aggression then as the real threat to civilization, all the more that aggression is present in all individuals. The society then is forced to use violent means to curb the threat; a form of violent reprisal of a violent tendency. Every institution in the society are called to reinforce the values of humanity, or more specifically of civilization (the values of liberalism and rationalism). This struggle between the two tendencies only increases the propensity of a bloody end. The values of civilization to which societies were built would be compromised to suit the demands of the “ outlaw.”

“ Civilization expects to prevent the worst atrocities of brutal violence by taking upon itself the right to employ violence against criminals, but the law is not able to lay hands on the more discreet and subtle forms in which human aggressions are expressed.

The time comes when every one of us has to abandon the illusory anticipations with which in our youth we regarded our fellow-men, and when we realize how much hardship and suffering we have been caused in life through their ill-will. It would be unfair, however, to reproach culture with trying to eliminate all disputes and competition from human concerns. These things are undoubtedly indispensable; but opposition is not necessarily enmity, only it may be misused to make an opening for it" (Freud, 1930/1989: 61). Heart of Darkness is a literary piece showing the conflict between two civilizations or more accurately two competing ideologies. The struggle between these two ideologies results to bloodshed and animosity among men; a sort of social anomie Durkheim referred to as the deterioration of social norms.

In Chapter III of the book, Conrad showed that men are induced to violence when demands and priorities conflict. The main character of the story, Kurtz, found his way in conflict with the natives and the ship's manager over the value of the ivory tusks.

" The manager enters the cabin to speak with Kurtz, and Marlow withdraws to the steamer's deck. From here he sees two natives standing near the river with impressive headdresses and spears, and a beautiful native woman draped in ornaments pacing gracefully along the shore. She stops and stares out at the steamer for a while and then moves away into the forest. Marlow notes that she must be wearing several elephant tusks' worth of ornaments.

The Russian implies that she is Kurtz's mistress, and states that she has caused him trouble through her influence over Kurtz. He adds that he would have tried to shoot her if she had tried to come aboard. The trader's

comments are interrupted by the sound of Kurtz yelling at the manager inside the cabin. Kurtz accuses the men of coming for the ivory rather than to help him, and he threatens the manager for interfering with his plans” (Conrad, 1971: 27).

Other Europeans though were eager to compete against Kurtz in acquiring ivory tusks from the natives. Thus, Marlow (a character in the story) and a Russian trader ended up aligning with Kurtz against their competitors.

Philosophically speaking, the story presented the staggering change of heart of Marlow. Instead of presenting himself as a man of humility, he was forced to redefine his values (Enlightenment values). He suddenly became obsessed of acquiring more and more wealth. He loathed the Africans for their irrationality and savagery. He accused the Europeans of exploiting the natives while he himself indulged in every form of luxury. In the end, he became violent and indignant to the basic principles of civilization; the same thing Sigmund Freud said (although the manner Freud assumed it was academic). Borowitz thesis can be summed up as follows: violence can be magnified using fear as the catalyst (Borowitz, 1976). In this book, the author portrayed the brutal murder of the Jews during the Second World War, specifically during Hitler’s Final Solution to the Jewish Question.

Freud, Conrad, and Borowitz are basically examining the basic urge in man: violence. Violence can destroy values which have been cherished since the birth of a powerful ideology. Only the methods of telling the message differed. Freud approach was academic, that of Conrad literary, that of Borowitz historical.

References

1. Borowitz, Thadeus. 1976. *This Way for the Gas Ladies and Gentleman*. New York: Penguin Books.
2. Conrad, Joseph. 1971. *Heart of Darkness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Freud, Sigmund. 1930/1989. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. W. Norton & Company; Reissue edition.