

HENRY HAZLITT

In Defense of Conformity

I cannot remember ever having read any essay, article, or book in defense of conformity. From my earliest days, I have found it disparaged or derided. Two of my favorite writers, in my teens and early twenties, were John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer. Spencer was the son of a Nonconformist (in the religious sense); Spencer's first article was even written for a magazine called the *Nonconformist*; and Spencer constantly lauded nonconformity in thought and action. Nonconformity was also one of the key virtues in John Stuart Mill's code of ethics. His essay, *On Liberty* (which appeared in 1859), is a paean in praise of variety, diversity, even eccentricity, in both behavior and thought. "In this age, the mere example of nonconformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service . . . It is desirable . . . that people should be eccentric."

Mill and Spencer, in their time, were really expressing a minority view, even among intellectuals. But their disparagement of conformity has become a deeply

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embedded part of our literary and philosophical tradition. It is now, ironically, the fashion; and it has been the fashion for at least the last quarter century. It would be hard to recall a college commencement address in all that time which has not deplored and warned against conformity. The only judicial opinions which we ever hear praised are the dissents. The highest honor which his admirers could think of bestowing upon the late Justice Holmes was to dub him The Great Dissenter.

What we find extolled and rewarded today seems to me to be more and more dissent for its own sake. The college president or the commencement orator assures himself a reputation for liberality and sagacity by suggesting that the students who riot, seize administration buildings, smash windows, burn files, and kick deans down stairs are more to be praised than those who are trying seriously to pursue their studies, because the rioters are Dissenters, alive to the new revolutionary tides in the world, resentful of the injustices going on everywhere, and determined to bring about — ah! magic word — Change. So the youngsters who get adult attention and newspaper headlines are not the quiet students who do well, even extraordinarily well, in their studies, but those who dress filthily, refuse to get haircuts or shaves, and make non-negotiable demands.

I should like to put forward what may today seem the perverse suggestion that there is a case for Conformity — conformity in dress, speech, manners, morals, action and thought. I would go even further, and suggest that without this basic conformity civilized society could hardly survive.

The essence of society is cooperation among individuals for the achievement of their common purposes. And conformity to accepted rules is an indispensable element of all cooperation.

I do not here attach to the word conformity any unusual or strained definition. The

first definition of "conform" in the Random House Dictionary is: "to act in accord or harmony; comply."

If we want concrete illustrations we could hardly do better than begin with traffic rules. The purpose of traffic rules is to maximize the flow of traffic and to minimize snarls and accidents. All such rules demand conformity: conformity to accepted and specified speed limits, to the rule of driving on the right side of the road (or the left in Britain), to the rules on right, left, and U-turns and one-way streets, to all legal signals and signs. When any driver insists on deciding for himself just which rules to conform to, he increases the probability of an accident. If every driver insisted on deciding for himself which rules, if any, to conform to, there would be traffic chaos.

But the traffic rules, in addition to their own inherent importance, symbolize all the rules by which society works and lives. As Henry Sidgwick remarked a century ago: "The life of man in society involves daily

a mass of minute forecasts of the actions of other men." These forecasts are necessary to human cooperation. We can make them correctly in so far as others conform to generally accepted rules. Every automobile driver depends on his ability to forecast accurately what the other fellow is going to do. This forecast is most often based on the assumption that the other fellow is going to conform to the established practice or rule applying to that situation.

Such conformity is indispensable for most of our daily actions. It makes life smoother and pleasanter even in trivial matters. The actions of men in modern society are synchronized by clocks and watches and set schedules. We depend on each other's punctuality. A worker gets to the factory at 8:00 and stays till 4:00 on the understanding that his co-workers and foreman will be there from 8:00 to 4:00.

The enormously increased efficiency and productivity brought about by the synchronization and division of labor are made



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(Abbie Hoffman, flanked by Tom Hayden and Jerry Rubin, and the members of the Chicago Conspiracy open May Day Rally to free Bobby Seale. Elbert "Big Man" Howard of the Panthers is on the right.)

possible only by this conformity to set time schedules. When a man takes the 8:17 to the office and the 5:26 home he depends on the railroad's conformity to this pre-advertised schedule; the railroad depends in turn on a sufficient number of commuters' adhering to it. If a dinner invitation is for 7:00, you get there at 7:00. If the symphony concert begins at 8:15 everybody is supposed to be in his seat by then.

IN short, a great society can function, in its diversions and pleasures no less than its work, only by the daily, hour-by-hour, and often minute-by-minute cooperation of its constituent members, their willing subordination to a common time-schedule that will enable them to synchronize their individual contributions. A business firm — a large newspaper, for example — can function and succeed only if each employee, reporter, re-write man, photographer, editor, printer, columnist, copy-boy, proofreader, advertising solicitor, artist, layout man, delivery truck driver, newsstand operator, carries out his special function on schedule.

This is what it means to be that now much derided creature, an Organization Man. The performance of any great constructive work whatever, the very survival of society, depends on the organization men and women. Modern society functions by the division of labor. The division of labor is only possible through cooperative organization. Cooperative organization is only possible through the mutual voluntary meshing and conformity of one man's contribution with that of others.

This must occur on both the largest and smallest scale, in university life, scientific research, business, sports, amusements. If a symphony concert is to give pleasure to anyone, then every player of every instrument in the orchestra must conform with the utmost precision of tempo and note to both the score before him and to the conductor's baton. Every performer, in addition to having the skill and training to do so, must willingly subordinate his individual contribution to the collective result that all the performers are trying to achieve. Each instrumentalist must be, not least of all, a superb Organization Man.

Conformity in manners, though the tendency of so many of the young today is to deride it as adherence to a needless and silly ritual, also makes daily life enormously

smoother and pleasanter than it would otherwise be. Take the understood rules for precedence through a doorway: the guest before the host, the lady before the man, the older before the younger, and so on. Or take even the rules of dress: Most of us dress not merely to please ourselves, but to please others, and even to show respect for others; so that if we accept an invitation to a formal dinner we put on the conventional formal wear. General recognition of these and similar rules obviously makes for more harmonious human relations.

Many readers will readily grant that such conformity to establish rules, written or unwritten, is necessary or at least generally desirable in matters of behavior; but surely, they will protest, not in matters of thought and opinion. Yet here it is necessary to make some very important distinctions.

PROGRESS in any of the sciences is only possible, of course, if at least some individuals make discoveries that change



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a hitherto accepted view. But these discoveries are not made by those who dissent simply for dissent's sake. They are made,

in the overwhelming majority of cases, by men who have arduously studied what has already been learned or discovered by their predecessors. It is only then that a thinker, however original, is in a position to understand the problems and difficulties and to propose or achieve a new solution. When he does this, he may be said to be "dissenting" from the previously accepted view, though "disagreeing" would be a more appropriate word. His disagreement, moreover, is merely incidental to his discovery. (Perhaps from here on out we should adhere strictly to the vital distinction recently made by Daniel J. Boorstin: "People who disagree have an argument, but people who dissent have a quarrel A liberal society thrives on disagreement but is killed by dissension.")

What has been said about the conditions for true progress in the sciences applies also in the arts. The architects of the ancient Greek temples, and of the cathedrals of the Middle Ages, had none of the uneasy struggle for "originality" that marks the architects of our own age. They were not determined that this year's temple or cathedral should be strikingly different from last year's. Architectural styles did change; but by centuries rather than by years, and one style almost imperceptibly evolved out of its predecessor. El Greco, the archetype of the great original painter, began as a student of Titian, and mastered the style of Titian before he developed his own daring innovations. The earlier compositions of another great innovator, Beethoven, were in the style of Haydn, one of his teachers. True originality usually grows out of the mastery of a tradition.

The modern penchant for innovation for its own sake, in art, science, and philosophy, is mainly a symptom of restlessness. As Morris R. Cohen pointed out in 1931: "The notion that we can dismiss the views of all previous thinkers surely leaves no basis for the hope that our own work will prove of any value to others."

Even the most independent and original thinker in his own field is compelled to assume provisionally the truth of the prevailing opinion in areas in which he is not an expert. It is absurd, even impossible, to challenge every accepted belief at once.

One fundamental reason why we follow custom is that we cannot make a fresh, original, and unique decision for every situation or contingency. We must economize our time and thought to meet situa-

tions for which no tested and customary response has been established. This applies to our conclusions as well as our behavior. As Bertrand Russell once remarked: "The average man's opinions are much less foolish than they would be if he thought for himself." And there is a limit to the number of subjects on which even the most brilliant man has time and knowledge to bestow independent thought, or challenge the accepted opinion.

I hope that at this point I may be allowed a personal note. I have thought of myself in the past as primarily a libertarian, but not as a conservative. And if the conservative position is interpreted as saying: Whatever is, is right; let us keep the old ways, the old institutions, the old beliefs, whatever they are; let us not change — then I am certainly not a conservative. But this picture is a caricature. The conservatism I have come to accept says, rather: Let us change our moral codes, our laws, our political institutions, when we find this to be necessary, but let us do so cautiously, gradually, piecemeal, making sure at each step that the change we are making is carefully considered and really represents a progress, not a retrogression. Let us beware always of sudden and sweeping change, of "wiping the slate clean," of "making a completely fresh start," of root and branch upheaval. That way lies chaos.

I will offer only a single illustration, from the field of law. There prevailed for generations, in the courts not only of this country but in responsible courts everywhere, the doctrine of *stare decisis*: "Stand by what has been settled": Let the principles of law established by previous judicial decisions be accepted as authoritative in cases similar to those from which such principles were derived. When the Warren Supreme Court contemptuously disregarded *stare decisis* it was at sea; and the Court is still at sea. Without this doctrine no one knows what the courts will decide or what the law is.

It is the increasing disregard of *stare decisis*, or its equivalent, in nearly all social areas today — in morals, manners, dress, in the legal, political, and economic field — that is now leading to such a chaotic result, to the disappearance of standards, to immorality, confrontations, riots, and crime. The glorification of "dissent" has turned into glorification of "protest," and finally

into a glorification of lawlessness and nihilism.

Nothing is easier than to destroy. The tree that has taken half a century to grow can be sawed down in less than an hour. The cathedral that took generations to build can be demolished by a bomb in a minute. And without having a single building demolished, a great university can lose within a few months, by capitulating to some senseless student demand, everything that made it worth respecting. But when the problem comes of supplanting what has been destroyed, the rebels have only a hollow rhetoric for answer.

Ironically, what emerges is a new conformity, less tolerant than the old, and without redeeming social utility. As the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley was pointing out more than forty years ago, there is "nothing more sheep-like than a flock of young rebels." This is glaringly evident in the hippies of today: the prescribed dress — uncut hair, untrimmed beards, boots, tight jeans with paint splotches, dirty oversized sweaters, bodily filthiness, pot, guitars, rock, free sex, mutual imitation in everything; and ridicule and intolerance of good manners, neatness, cleanliness, patriotism, work, saving, self-discipline, responsibility, and everybody over thirty.

And in the realm of ideas (as Cooley was also pointing out forty years ago) young radicals, trying mainly to be unlike others, fall into "a subservience of contradiction." They take their cue from their "orthodox" opponents, and grab the other end of the same rope, so that in every age the conspicuous radicals are likely to be contra-

dictors and hence subservient, while real changes gestate in obscurity.

LET me not be misunderstood. This essay is in defense of conformity because, to repeat, a prevailing conformity is essential to mutual cooperation, and cooperation is essential to the achievement of our common ends. But in pointing to the indispensableness of conformity I am not trying to disparage nonconformity, or diversity, or independence, and certainly not individuality or originality. It is mainly a question of emphasis. What I am suggesting is that, in a turbulent and revolutionary era like the present, it is not especially helpful to keep praising nonconformity, dissent, and protest as if they were absolute virtues in themselves, regardless of what belief or practice is being protested or dissented from. We must always try to judge each belief or practice (if it lies within our own individual sphere of competence) on its own merits, rather than in conformity or nonconformity with what other people think or do. It may possibly have been true, when Mill wrote it more than a century ago: "That so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of our time." But that so many now try to be eccentric, marks one of the chief dangers of *our* time. Nonconformity, dissent, and protest are in themselves disintegrative. True individualism and originality can flourish only within a basically cooperative system.

In sum, in the interests of social harmony and genuine progress, conformity must be the rule, and nonconformity the exception.

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