

REMARKS BY JOHN W. GARDNER Chairman, The Urban Coalition  
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This is an occasion so rich in history that it has administered a strong stimulus, perhaps too strong, to my sense of the past and future. Had it been a milder stimulus, I could have contented myself with the nostalgia, congratulations and rosy prognosis traditional to centennial celebrations. To look back reverently, to applaud present vitality, to predict an upward path ahead would have been particularly easy in the case of this great institution -- so vital, so full of promise, so worthy of admiration.

But this is not a year in the life of American universities, nor in the life of the nation, that invites such a traditional approach. So I am going to broaden the focus beyond Cornell and beyond universities to human institutions generally. I am going to take you on a six hundred year tour of history, beginning some three centuries ago and stretching three centuries into the future. Such a tour might present some difficulties for a qualified historian, but it is a mere finger exercise for the practiced commencement speaker.

In the 17th and 18th Centuries, increasing numbers of people began to believe that men could determine their own fate, shape their own institutions and gain command of the social forces that buffeted them.

Before then, from the beginning, men had believed that all the major features of their lives were determined by immemorial custom or fate or the will of God. It was one of the great Copernican turns of history that brought men gradually, over two or three centuries, to the firm conviction that he could have a hand in shaping his institutions.

No one really knows all the ingredients that went into the change, but we can identify some major elements. One was the emergence, with the Scientific Revolution, of a way of thinking that sought objectively identifiable cause-and-effect relationships. People trained in that way of thinking about the physical world were bound to note that the social world too had its causes and effects. And with that discovery came, inevitably, the idea that one might manipulate the cause to alter the effect.

At the same time people were less and less inclined to explain their daily lives and institutions in terms of God's will. And that trend has continued to this day. Less and less do men suppose, even those who believe devoutly in a Supreme Being, that God busies himself with day-to-day micro-administration of the world.

While all of this was happening, new modes of transportation and communication were breaking down parochial attitudes all over the world. As men discovered that human institutions and customs varied enormously from one society to the next, it became increasingly difficult to think of one's own institutions as unalterable, increasingly easy to conceive of a society in which men consciously shaped their institutions and customs.

The result is that today any bright high school student can discourse on social forces and institutional change. A few centuries ago, even for learned men, such matters were "given", ordained, not subject to analysis, fixed in the great design of things.

Up to a point the new views were immensely exhilarating. In the writings of our Founding Fathers, for example, one encounters a mood approaching exaltation as they proceed to shape a new nation.

But more recently another consequence has become apparent. The new views place an enormous -- in some instances an unbearable -- burden on the social structures that man has evolved over the centuries. Those structures have become the sole target and receptacle for all man's hope and hostility. He has replaced his fervent prayer to God with a shrill cry of anger against his own institutions. I claim no special insight into the unknowable Deity, but He must be chuckling.

Men can tolerate extraordinary hardship if they think it is an unalterable part of life's travail. But an administered frustration -- unsanctioned by religion or custom or deeply rooted values -- is more than the spirit can bear. So increasingly men rage at their institutions. All kinds of men rage at all kinds of institutions, here and around the world. Most of them have no clear vision of the kind of world they want to build; they only know that they don't want the kind of world they have.

So much for the past and present.

I told you I would take you three centuries into the future. I am able to do this thanks to a Cornell scientist who recently discovered how man may step off the time dimension and visit the past or future at will. You may be surprised you haven't heard about this, but he doesn't want to publicize his findings until he has won a few more horse races.

At any rate he gave me a few pills, and since I'm not interested in horse races, I decided to find out what the future holds in the struggle between man and his institutions. I cannot guarantee the results. I do not offer what follows as a prediction. Perhaps the pill just gave me bad dreams.

The first thing I learned is that in the last third of the 20th Century, the rage to demolish succeeded beyond the fondest dreams of the dismantlers. They brought everything tumbling down. Since the hostility to institutions was a product of modern minds, the demolition was most thorough in the most advanced nations.

You will be pleased to know that unlike the fall of Rome, this decline was not followed by hundreds of years of darkness. In fact, there followed less than a century of chaos and disorder.

In the latter part of the 21st Century the rebuilding began. Since chaos is always followed by authoritarianism, this was a period of iron rule, world-wide -- a world society rigidly organized and controlled. I don't think I shall tell you what language was spoken.

But tyrannies tend to grow lax, even under futuristic methods of thought control. By the end of the 22nd Century, the sternly disciplined institutions of the World Society had grown relatively tolerant, and the old human impulse to be free had begun to reassert itself.

In the new, more permissive atmosphere, men were again allowed to study history -- which had been under a ban for two centuries. The effect was electric. To those austere and antiseptic minds, conditioned to the requirements of a technically advanced authoritarianism, the rediscovery of man's history was intoxicating. It generated an intellectual excitement that dominated the whole Twenty-third Century. Scholars were entranced by the variety of human experience, shocked by the violence and barbarism, saddened by the stupidities and exalted by the achievements of their forebears.

And as they searched that history, excitedly, sadly, lovingly, they returned increasingly to the 20th Century as a moment of curious and critical importance in the long pageant.

All the evidence available to them indicated that the preceding centuries had seen a vast and impressive movement in the direction of institutions that were responsive to the will of men. There were setbacks, to be sure, and trouble and hypocrisy and failures -- but over the years the trend was unmistakable.

Why then, in the late 20th Century did men turn on their institutions and destroy them in a fit of impetience?

As one 23rd Century scholar put it, "Until we answer that question we shall never be sure that we are not preparing the same fate for ourselves."

As they studied the history of the 20th Century, they discovered that human expectations had risen sharply in the middle years of the century. They observed that men came to demand more and more of their institutions -- and with greater intransigence. And they noted that the demands for instant performance led to instant disillusionment, for while aspirations leapt ahead, human institutions remained sluggish -- less sluggish to be sure, than at any previous time in history, but still inadequately responsive to human need.

Twenty-third Century scholars finally concluded that the tension between released aspirations and sluggish human institutions would always be potentially hazardous, and that the whole cycle could repeat itself. But they disagreed as to the implications.

One school of thought said the big mistake had been to let aspirations loose in the first place. Human aspirations, they said, should be kept under tight control.

The opposing school of thought argued that human aspirations were a dynamic force that held enormous potential for good. They insisted that the main problem was to make human institutions less sluggish. The only error of the mid-20th Century, they said, was to release aspirations without designing institutions responsive enough to satisfy those aspirations.

After years of debate, the two schools of thought began to come together and a common doctrine began to emerge.

The first thing they agreed on was that human aspirations were capable of contributing enormously to the dynamism of the society, and therefore should not be tightly bottled up. But they also agreed that there must be procedural bounds within which the aspirations could express themselves.

Some were quick to point out that in the mid-20th Century such procedural bounds did exist, and functioned quite well, permitting extraordinary scope and variety of dissent, until the last third of the century, when the bounds were increasingly rejected and the dissolution of the society began. Back of the rejection was the impatient hostility that late 20th Century man felt toward his institutions. Those who consciously sought the destruction of their society and its institutions were never more than a small minority, but they found it easy to trigger the latent hostility of larger numbers of people. Many, of course, were ignorant of the long, painful evolution of procedures for the expression of dissent, for the protection of individual rights, for the maintenance of that framework of order without which freedom is impossible. Others were not ignorant but very angry. The result was the same.

The second thing 23rd Century scholars came to agree upon was that if society is going to release aspirations for institutional change -- which is precisely what many 20th Century societies deliberately did -- then it had better be sure its institutions are capable of such change. In this respect they found the 20th Century sadly deficient.



Most institutions were designed to obstruct change rather than facilitate it. And that is not really surprising. The institutions were, after all, designed by human beings, and most men most of the time do not want the institutions in which they themselves have a vested interest to change. Professors were often cited as an interesting example of this tendency, because they clearly favored innovation in other parts of the society but steadfastly refused to make universities into flexible, adaptive, self-renewing institutions.

There were, of course, a good many people in the 20th Century who did want change -- but they were curiously indifferent to the task of redesigning their institutions so that change could be readily accomplished. Many of them were moral zealots who expended their total energy in headlong combat between themselves, whom they believed to be very, very good, and specified others whom they believed to be very, very bad; and the object of the combat was to do in the baddies, even if it meant doing in oneself. This led to endless hostilities, especially when those marked for assault had equally strong convictions about their own moral superiority. It was particularly difficult when the two groups spoke a different language or were separated by an ocean or thirty years in age.

There were other reformers who were considerably more discriminating and saw that to achieve their ends they must change human institutions. But even these often misconceived the fundamental task.

Each such reformer came to his task with a little bundle of desired changes. The society is intolerable, he would assert, because it has these specifiable defects: a, b, c ... and so on. The implication was that if appropriate reforms a', b' and c' were carried through and the defects corrected, the society would be wholly satisfactory and the work of the reformer done.

That, as 23rd Century scholars plainly saw, was a primitive way of viewing social change. The true task, they saw, was to design a society (and institutions) capable of continuous change, continuous renewal, continuous responsiveness. They understood that this was entirely feasible, indeed they noted that the 20th Century had hit upon a number of partial solutions to the problem of designing self-renewing institutions, but had never pursued the task with adequate vigor. I might add parenthetically that I, myself, wrote a book on this subject back in the 20th Century. It was entitled Self-Renewal. I won't review its findings here, because I wouldn't want to spoil your enjoyment of the book.

Because of failure to design institutions capable of continuous renewal, 20th Century societies showed astonishing sclerotic streaks. Even in the United States, which was then the most adaptable of all, the departments of the Federal Government were in grave need of renewal; State Government was in most places an old attic full of outworn relics; local government was a wax works of stiffly preserved anachronisms; the system of taxation was a tangle of dysfunctional measures; the courts were crippled by archaic organizational arrangements; the unions, the professions, the universities, the corporations, each had spun its own impenetrable web of vested interests.

Such a society could not respond to challenge. And it did not.

But as one 23rd Century scholar put it, "The reformers couldn't have been less interested in the basic adaptability of the society. That posed tough and complex tasks of institutional redesign that bored them to death. They preferred the joys of combat, of adversary relationships, of villain hunting. As for the rest of the society, it was dozing off in front of the television set."

The 23rd Century scholars made another exceptionally interesting observation. They pointed out that 20th Century institutions were caught in a savage crossfire between uncritical lovers and unloving critics. On the one side, those who loved their institutions tended to smother them in an embrace of death, loving their rigidities more than their promise, shielding them from life-giving criticism. On the other side, there arose a breed of critics without love, skilled in demolition but untutored in the arts by which human institutions are nurtured and strengthened and made to flourish.

Between the two, the institutions perished.

The 23rd Century scholars understood that where human institutions were concerned love without criticism brings stagnation, and criticism without love brings destruction. And they emphasized that the swifter the pace of change, the more lovingly men had to care for and criticize their institutions to keep them intact through the turbulent passages.

In short, men must be discriminating appraisers of their society, knowing coolly and precisely what it is about the society that thwarts or limits them -- and therefore needs modification. And so must they be discriminating protectors of their institutions, preserving those features that nourish and strengthen them and make them more free. To fit themselves for such tasks, they must be sufficiently serious to study their institutions, sufficiently dedicated to become expert in the art of modifying them.

Having arrived at these judgments, 23rd Century leaders proceeded to redesign their own society for continuous renewal.

Commenting on the debt they owed to the 20th Century experience, one of them said: "It is not just that we have learned from 20th Century mistakes. We have learned from 20th Century insights. For in that troubled time there were men who were saying just what we are saying now. And if they had been heeded, the solutions we have reached would have come 300 years earlier. But no one was listening."

Ladies and gentlemen, as I told you earlier, I cannot guarantee the glimpse of the future given me by my friend, the Cornell scientist. Come to think of it, he hasn't been winning his horse races consistently.

So perhaps it's not too late to alter history's course.

President Perkins, I bow to this great institution on its hundredth anniversary. May it have from all members of the Cornell family the life-giving criticism and the nurturing, strengthening love that will insure its future.