

THE INDIVIDUAL IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

I. Contemporary Culture (Anthropologist)

A. The Setting for Our Times

1. The Great Turning Points
  - a. Discovery of tools
  - b. Beginning of Agriculture
  - c. Industrial revolution
2. Man's span of life in the longness of history
3. The reassurance of the long view
  - a. Wars don't destroy civilization
  - b. Cultural values change slowly
  - c. Cultural traits of a dominant people change little in the life span of an individual
4. What should we consider when we look at our place in the world?  
(The observational position of the student of cultures.)
  - a. The institutions of society
  - b. The habits of a society
  - c. The interchange of cultural traits among societies, the borrowing and giving of institutions and habits.

Note: Each of these points--institutions, habits, and interchange--should be illustrated by descriptions of appropriate studies of social groups, preferably both pre-literate and literate groups, to indicate the universality of culture.

5. What do we find when we examine these points for our own society?  
(Here a summary of the most important conclusions to be discussed more in detail in the second lecture.)

- B. The Seminar in the afternoon following the above lecture might be left to chance. I hope not. If it is not to be left to chance, I would suggest that the lecturer, or a chairman, should direct the opening statement to the question of the individual's importance in spite of the long sweep of history. A war may not wreck civilization, but it can upset part of an individual's life. It was small comfort at the time to opine that the Black Plague would probably not ruin western culture. If the anthropologist doesn't want to answer this, ideas could be uttered by the audience, perhaps by advance planning with people of varied ideas. A discussion focussed on this topic would introduce the theme of the place of an individual in an old and bewildering world, to be followed later by the psychiatrist who will develop the theme.

Probably the discussions following each evening lecture should be devoted to amplification and clarification of the lecture itself. In any case, we should get the manuscript ahead of time and have some students and faculty read it so they can ask significant questions. (I don't see why we should waste time, for example, with questions from people

who have not listened to the lecture and who merely ask the speaker to repeat what he has already said.)

C. Our Times (second lecture) -- predominantly the industrial revolution and our culture.

1. The present condition and probable near future of:
  - a. Our institutions, e.g., the church, the family, the form of the state, the school. (The lecturer, of course, will choose the topics he wants to discuss. These are only examples.)
  - b. Our habits, e.g., the practice of individualism, love in the machine age, work and leisure. (Again only suggestions.)
  - c. The interchange of cultural traits. Have we Western Europeans spread our culture so far since 1492 that we are no longer the dominant people but are instead to be overcome by the people, e.g. the Orientals, to whom we have given our tools and skills? Does geography protect this hemisphere if the above is true?
  - d. A prediction for the next fifty years, summarizing the main conclusions of the analysis of our times.

Note: Illustrative references to pre-literate and literate societies should be sprinkled throughout both lectures, for analogy and for contrast.



## II. The Individual in Contemporary Culture

### A. The Disturbing Aspects of Our World (What makes it hard to be happy.)

1. Institutions in transition affect the security of the individual, e.g., family relations, church practices, the ominous strong centralized state. Cultural lag disturbs the individual.
2. Changing social habits cause individual insecurity because the comforting authority of a routine is displaced, e.g. the handicap on romantic love, the threats to individualism, the unrewarding aimlessness of leisure.
3. The threat of other groups who have borrowed our "progress" is disturbing to the individual, e.g. the "Negro problem", "the Jews," "the Yellow Peril", or "the Foreigners in our midst who may be fifth columnists."

Note: These topics are the same as those suggested for the preceding lecture by the Anthropologist. Whatever topics are chosen finally, I think that both speakers should use the same categories in order to tie the two weeks together. This outline, taken as a whole, is an attempt to introduce and develop a few themes with the continuity to come from references forward and backward and from repetition.

4. The normality of individual insecurity and the need to adjust.
  - a. A psychiatrist looks at healthy, normal people as well as sick people. The sick people are those whose adjustment to their culture has taken a perverse form.
  - b. Definition of the degrees, or levels, of individual adjustment: each ordinary individual normally, quite healthily, finds his own adjustment. The ones who make a pathological adjustment are conspicuous for their eccentricity and are not the subject of consideration here.
5. The variety of psychological environments. While all individuals live in the common culture of their society, each has at the same time his own particular world of influences which affect his personality. The individual is a member of society; he is also an Ego with his particular career line.
6. All this, i.e., the cultural causes for disturbance, the normality of insecurity, the variety of psychological environment, the fact that an individual lives his life in an effort to satisfy his own ego in adjustment to his social group--all this means that the individual is inevitably important. (Refer back to seminar question of preceding week: Doesn't the individual matter in the long span of history?)
  - a. Psychological critique of autocratic state, family, church,, i.e. institutions.
  - b. Psychological comment on the individual's inevitable role in social habits, e.g., love, freedom, work and leisure.
  - c. Psychological explanation of the individual's plight in the face of threats from other cultural groups, i.e. interchange of culture.

- B. Seminar. In the case of the lectures on the Individual in Contemporary Culture, I am inclined at the moment to suggest that the lectures be held on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings and that the seminar be held on Thursday afternoon. My reason is that I believe a seminar discussion with a psychiatrist would be most interesting and most helpful to members of the audience if it were built around case histories, either case histories from the audience or case histories from the psychiatrist's experience. The psychiatrists, I am told, are now working more and more with group discussion of particular problems. If this emphasis is adopted for the seminar, the case histories should be discussed after both the lectures have been given and the rounded picture of the individual in contemporary culture has been painted.
- C. The Adjustment of Women to Social Change (How to be happy though alive.)
1. Social change is defined as the constant development of institutions, social habits, and the interchange of cultural traits, which is as inevitable as the effect it has on individual security.
  2. The question is how an individual can attain the maximum of security, or happiness, in our culture under conditions of steady change. In this particular reference the question is especially how women can attain the maximum of happiness.
  3. The adjustment has to be the particular adjustment of each individual to the other people in his environment and to the institutions, social habits and cultural interchange at the time of his existence.
  4. At this point special topics would be considered and advice given in common sense terms; again under the heads which were introduced in the second lecture, i.e. the one by the anthropologist, of institutions, social habits, cultural interchange.
    - a. Institutions: the adjustment of women to the family, the church, the state and civic life.
    - b. Social habits: the adjustment of women to love, work, and leisure.
    - c. Cultural interchange and the threat of invasion by other cultures.

Note: In all references to these areas of adjustment, I would suggest that the speaker illustrate her points by comments on the adjustment to life via art, group participation of all kinds, religion, and work. This would be the main part of this lecture and it would have to be outlined in further detail by the professional person who would know what to talk about.

5. A reference back to the closing prediction of the next fifty years in the second lecture by the anthropologist, and a summary statement of the most promising routes to personal security during the next fifty years. (The fifty-year period is chosen because that is the life expectancy of the present students at Bennington College.)