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THE INFLATION OF POLITICS AND THE DISINTEGRATION OF CULTURE

by Arianna Stassinopoulos

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Her first book, The Female Woman, was published in 1973 and has been translated into seven languages. She has since pursued an active career in journalism, broadcasting and public speaking.

Miss Stassinopoulos appears regularly on radio and television, and contributes articles to various newspapers and magazines. Her speech topics include politics, religion, and music. Her latest book, After Reason, will be published this spring.

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Item: \$60,000 in tax money was spent last year to finance a research project on the vital statistics of airline stewardesses. It was determined that stewardesses' noses averaged 2.18 inches in length.

Item: \$120,000 in public money was spent to finance an inquiry into whether college students get sexually aroused watching pornographic movies while smoking marijuana.

Item: Between 1960 and 1974, the total level of expenditure on social welfare programs in the United States increased \$120 billion, from \$50 billion to \$170 billion. According to the Bureau of Census there are 25 million poor people in the United States, defined as people with an income level of \$4,137 or less for a given year for a family of four. If that \$120 billion—not the whole budget, just the increase—had simply been given to the poor, it would have given each and every one of them an annual stipend of \$4,800 a year, or \$19,200 for every family of four. Yet the poor are still with us. Who is getting all the money?

Item: The two richest counties in the U.S. according to average family incomes are Montgomery County, Maryland, and Fairfax County, Virginia—two "bedroom" counties for federal government employees.

Of course this list of government horror stories could be extended *ad infinitum, ad nauseam*, long past the point when my readers would be writhing on the floor. Yet no matter how often and how dramatically the facts are revealed, the absorption of life by politics, and the waste by government, continues and grows.

There is one hope, and one hope only, for stopping the takeover of life by politics and the onslaught of totalitarianism—and it lies outside the arena of political controversy. Countless millions of people are searching for something—far from politics—to fill the void in their lives. The god of all-wise, all-powerful government has failed.

Never in the whole of human history have there been so many efforts to explore spiritual avenues, nor so many of these avenues examined, as there are today. Nor has there ever been anything remotely approaching the proportions of people engaged in seeking some such avenue for themselves. And, despite appearances to the contrary, the Western political predicament, our collapsing culture, and the intense search now going on to find an extra dimension in the universe are closely related.

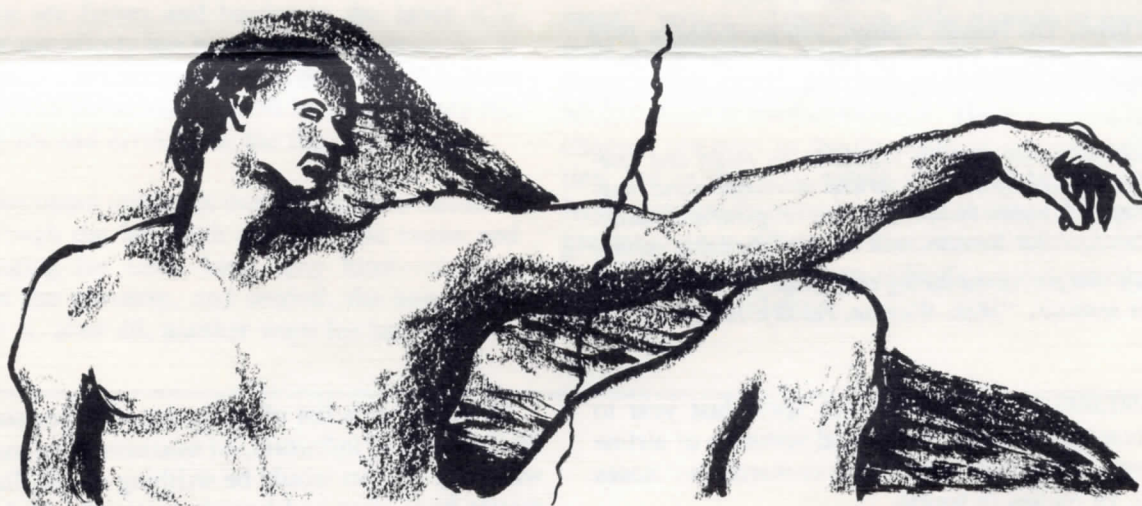
Indeed, here lies the key to the understanding of our political predicament. We go on trying to understand

im•pri•mis (im-pri' mīs) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things). . .

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politics in terms of politics alone—which increasingly has come to mean in terms of economics—as though political beliefs and problems existed in a vacuum, totally detached from the rest of our culture. The result is that most of the questions to which, in contemplating our predicament and our future, we are usually invited to address ourselves, are largely irrelevant. There is little point in asking a man who is going over Niagara Falls in a barrel what he thinks about American-Canadian relations, or in criticizing the design of the wallpaper in a house that has just disappeared into the San Andreas Fault.

Only by going beyond the peripheral issues dominating the current political debate, and beyond the palpable political lies we have to swallow every day, and looking at the deeper falsehoods ingrained in the western world



view, will we begin to understand the nature of the political reality. Nothing less will show us the real political constraints within which our pragmatic politicians have to operate. Of course many of these proud pragmatists would laugh at the idea that they are contaminated by anything as mystical as a “world view.” But in fact, however much we may like to deceive ourselves that we deal only in rationality, efficiency and progress, and that we speak only the pure language of facts, figures and statistics, we all hold a world view. We do not learn it in any conscious way—we catch it from the spirit of the times. We are converted to it by unaccountable experiences. And the more unaccountable and emotional the experiences, the less likely we are to be swayed by arguments against our world view, however fallacious our position and however disastrous its practical consequences.

How else can we explain the fact that although there are now mountains of statistical evidence attesting the total failure of collectivism, statist solutions are still proposed for every imaginable problem? Indeed, almost all indices of increased state power continue going up. It is true that

the catalogue of collectivist failures together with the work of refugees from the liberal establishment, like Daniel Moynihan in America and Peter Jay in England, who joined the revolt against the State, have made anti-collectivism less bizarre. But they have not made it more victorious.

What are the false root assumptions that lie behind all “pragmatic” political solutions and that give collectivism its real power? I am going to single out three of the illusions dominating our age—the three that in my opinion best explain the political stranglehold on our lives and the onrushing disintegration of our culture.

The first is the false promise of political and social utopianism that permeates the pronouncements of all

political parties, whether conservative, liberal, or Marxist. This creates the illusion of salvation through technological gains and through politics and government action. Supposedly with the right policies of regulation, control, allocation and provision, society will be made rational, just and capable of affording each individual the opportunity to realize his own potential. While this illusion persists, widespread dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs goes hand in hand with an emphatic conviction that all our problems are curable, and that redemption can and must be achieved through government action. Moreover, the methods of the natural scientists, magnificent as they have been in producing results in their own field, are extolled and illegitimately applied to the political world as well. In time, methods become mentalities. Methods that at best work only for limited problems become all pervasive, a philosophy with universal claims; and they harden into a closed system unwilling to assimilate any evidence, however overwhelming, that contradicts it.

So it is that democratic leaders and a bemused electorate go on drawing epicycles on the wall of Plato’s cave, their backs firmly turned to the daylight of reality, while

the collectivist onslaught continues unabated. And as the flood of dollars, regulations, welfare programs, commissions, and bills fails to produce the promised merger between heaven and earth, we are assured that all that is needed is more public spending, more welfare programs, and more State control. And this at a time when the State takes nearly 60 percent of the national income in Britain and 44 percent in the United States.

As the traditional liberal medicine for all social ills—more taxes and more public spending—fails to produce a cure, disillusionment spreads. Yet the same hopeless measures will go on being advocated until it is realized that the underlying shortage has not been money but knowledge, and that the underlying reason for the failures has not been the methods used, but the false hope of salvation through politics.

The second illusion dominating the Western world view is the belief that economic advancement is the overriding national priority and that economic security is the most important objective for the individual. This notion has become commonplace, accepted uncritically by most.

As a result, in Western democracies the panic over a defective washing machine has gradually acquired the same kind of fear that hunger held in harsher times. The concept of economic security no longer means the absence of need, but rather the preservation of a particular degree of affluence. The poor have become those who do not possess as many amenities as others have. Under these definitions, the political technicians can perpetually claim to meet the “social needs” of the least affluent portion of the public—some will always be worse off than others. The conflicts and sacrifices involved in following centralizing policies can be safely obscured; and the people can die defending their social benefits.

So long as the promotion of prosperity remains the supreme aim of Western societies, with moral and spiritual values relegated to throat-clearing preliminaries, social welfare will continue to be hallowed as religious dogma—in the name of comfort and security. The results are unmistakable and they are everywhere to be seen around us: grown men have been condemned to what Milton, in his attack on the State in the *Areopagitica*, described as a “perpetual childhood of prescription.” And what is worse, the common tendency to regress to childish patterns of behavior has been invested by political leaders with a quasi-religious creed, with the State in the role of the father and the “system” (which is somehow always assumed to be capitalistic, regardless of the facts) in the role of the wicked stepmother. Whenever the wicked stepmother creates problems—and any discrepancy between reality and the goals proclaimed by social engineers in their infinite wisdom is by definition a problem—father has to step in and save us.

When material security is regarded as the gift of the State and is the individual citizen’s paramount preoccupation, overshadowing all other values, then it is easy to argue that the interests of the individual and the interests of the State are the same. But then it is also the case that political servitude will be accepted as a fair price to pay for the continuation of material prosperity; and any State measure, however restrictive of individual freedom, will be justified so long as it advances social security. Thus social security, having been turned into an indispensable component of the individual personality, has become a channel of subliminal manipulation. The Welfare State has paved the way to the new totalitarianism. Unlike the old-fashioned variety that rather messily depended on force, it relies instead on willing submission in return for comfort, security, and technological perfection. “Liberty will not be Catholic enough,” Don Juan predicted in *Man and Superman*, “men will die for human perfection, to which they will sacrifice all their liberty gladly.”

A study that looked at relative public expenditure levels in the Communist and the capitalist world found that, when allowances were made for different economic levels, the countries were indistinguishable in their expenditure on health and welfare, converging in their expenditure on education, and significantly different only to the extent that the capitalist countries spent more on traffic control and the Communist ones more on police and internal security. “Electricity plus Bolshevism,” Lenin once said, “equals Communism.” He was wrong: it turned out that the subservience of free human beings to a revolutionary amalgam of technology, politics, and welfare could only be secured by a reign of terror and autocratic despotic powers, including a high level of public expenditure on “internal security.” Many Russians could not—and cannot—forget that autocratic orders are “to be obeyed but not carried out,” and many exceptionally brave ones insist on remembering that they need not be obeyed at all.

In contrast, once democracy is established as a fundamentally economic concept, as it unambiguously has been in Sweden and is increasingly becoming so elsewhere in the West, then it functions solely for economic egalitarianism and it can be made to embrace any degree of tyranny provided more prosperity, more security and more social welfare are guaranteed. Hence the opposition can be disarmed gently and effortlessly, and the elected leaders can be assured the supreme political blessings long denied to the despots of the Kremlin: compliant citizenship and an all-powerful unopposed bureaucratic establishment.

The harsh but unavoidable truth is that in the West, no less than in the Communist world, man’s first business—his physical needs and economic activities—has increasingly become his chief business, and a secure, prosperous life the only object of living. True, at the beginning there

were two parts to Western liberalism: an ethical and political system that established how men should live as individuals and in relation to each other; and a metaphysical theory that explained why they should live thus and not otherwise. One necessitates the other. But the age of reason politely dismissed the metaphysical part as Christian superstition or poetical imagination, leaving only the practical portion in view.

Only by acknowledging and stressing the spiritual element in man can individualist leaders hope to prevent the West, and the world, from being swamped by militant collectivism that aims at forcing everyone into one pattern of community and one particular utopian vision. Only by bringing about a cultural framework in which politics and life are not seen exclusively as the satisfaction of man's

to be refuted—and more to the point, they will *be* just that. They will make no impact on the enemy because they cannot refute an enemy whose fundamental world view they share. Marxist dogma and collectivist practice are a manifestation of the soulless anti-religious nature of Western liberalism; or if you want to put it another way, Western liberalism is one step on the road to Marxism. The defense of freedom will remain half-hearted unless it is based on the ultimate value of the individuality of each human being—that is, the ultimate spiritual value and not some functional value as a freely productive unit, or a freely saving member of the middle classes, or indeed a freely consuming member of groups A and B.

Those conservatives and disillusioned liberals who are not content to dance along a precipice, surrendering more



economic needs can we hope to save individual freedom.

Unfortunately it seems at times that the case for defending freedom today is predominantly in the hands of those prosaically crying for a return to the closed, charmed circle of the Forsytes: to thrift, responsibility, stability, respectability—that is, to all the important but profoundly secondary virtues. If freedom and opportunity mean no more than this and offer no spiritual dimension, we can deplore the fact that many people will choose slavery but we have no right to be surprised by the choice. The more complete the estrangement of our spiritual self, the more impossible it becomes to stand alone and self-sufficient; the greater the urge to reject ourselves and make common cause with whatever comes along the way. Any cause will do—indeed, the post-war period is littered with causes. There will be no escape from the continuing inflation of politics and the relentless disintegration of our culture.

The defenders of freedom, whether conservatives, libertarians, or social democrats, will go on being regarded as an aberration to be explained rather than a challenge

and more in order to survive at all, should begin by restoring the moral dimension to the defense of freedom. No less powerful a truth can transform the anti-collectivists from an amorphous, scattered opposition, linked only by hostility towards the social-change merchants and egalitarians, into a positive force that will articulate the passionate need for a spiritual interpretation of the meaning of our lives. And once the sluices of the dam that has for so long held back the life-giving spiritual truth are opened, the assault of collectivism on our freedoms will not stand a chance.

For now it is our desiccated liberalism that does not stand a chance against a doctrine that sees itself, and is seen by many of its nerveless enemies, as the world's inexorable fate. The crude absurdities of the collectivist promises can withstand any factual assault; there is embodied in the doctrine a fact-proof screen that resists the realities of the world. Experience and observations are powerless against fanaticism. It is only spiritual strength that can overcome it, because it is only the spiritually strong who can defy the faith of political salvation and expose its lies.

The third dominant illusion of the Western world view involves nothing less than our root view of man, and is in fact an assumption that our secular humanism shares with Marxism: man is seen as an exclusively rational being, and social ills as brought about by wrong choices, wrong leaders or wrong political systems. Inevitably, as soon as evils are explained by ideologies and systems, and not by reference to man himself, all skepticism about secular redemption through social engineering disappears. The clamor for political action becomes irresistible and political leaders of all types exploit the entrenched expectations of political utopianism. Democrats will be everywhere on the defensive as long as opposition to the increasing government control of society remains a *pragmatic* concern, uninformed by a new, or rather a very old but *forgotten* view of man: not as the object of ideological concepts and theories, not as a random manifestation of general laws of human behavior, but as a unique being, whose essential spiritual element cannot be reduced to matter and economics. Nor can it be reduced to impersonal scientific laws interpreted by impersonal ideologies for the sake of a miserable and impersonal status of supposed economic security.

One of the major problems the defenders of freedom have to face is that today the state Leviathan has not just ideology but alleged scientific expertise on its side. Armed with such mechanistic terms as “parameters,” “variables,” “structures,” “inputs and outputs,” “maximization,” and “cost-benefits,” our machine politician can totally mystify the popular mind by creating illusions of omnipotence and omniscience—just as the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt used their monopoly of the calendar to command the awed docility of ignorant subjects. At the same time they thoroughly mask the ideology that underlies all their policies and solutions, and perpetuate the myth that they are dealing exclusively in political and economic necessities.

Politicians assert that they alone can provide solutions to the increasingly “complex” problems of our civilization. But it is the supreme *hubris* of modern “rational” man to imagine that no order and no change not deliberately planned by him can possibly materialize. And it is the supreme limitation of our reformers and model-makers that they are incapable of conceiving social improvements that are the result of human action but not of human design.

“Liberty is essential in order to leave room for the unexpected,” writes Hayek. “All institutions of freedom are adaptations of this fundamental fact of ignorance adapted to deal with chances and probabilities, not certainty.” Hayek is right. But only up to a point. It is indeed true that freedom offers practical virtues that lead to much greater efficiency than any collectivist solutions. No matter how meticulously planned collectivism may be, it

can never capture the billion-fold intricacies of economic life, let alone of social and economic and political life together. But so long as freedom goes on being defended as a *practical* virtue, it will be impossible to reverse the modern trend towards democratic despotisms.

If we intend to preserve individual freedom, on which, after all, our civilization is based, we must rebuild the link between the individual and the *absolute* source of his rights. The demand for a spiritual reawakening, far from being an attack on reason, restores the inalienable rights of men to their only rational basis, the belief propounded two hundred years ago by the American Founding Fathers, that every human being is in the likeness of God, and has therefore an absolute value. When the spiritual roots of the citizen’s eternal rights are forgotten, humanism denies itself, and the individual man becomes a tool in the achievement of the politician’s goals.

The relegation of religion and spirituality to the “irrational” has been one of the most tragic perversions of the great achievements of Western rationality, and the main reason for the disintegration of Western culture. Reason is thus reduced to its most prosaic and least ambitious role—a tool for exploring the logic of policies while the values, the ordering ideas on which all political action rests, go by unchallenged.

We long to flee from culture and from the meaningless tumult of our lives. What will be the refuge? Many have taken to gloom as others take to drink, and, the apocalyptic gleam in their eyes, they loudly and cheerfully proclaim that all efforts are futile and that we are doomed to perish. Previous collapsed civilizations, from the Roman to the Maya to the Khmer, are indiscriminately offered as conclusive proof.

It is indeed true that so long as we continue to escape from ourselves by looking out and seeking to change the world, gloom is the only alternative to dreaming dreams of achieving paradise on earth through State action. The vision of achieving happiness and perfection on earth through political transformation gives to its defenders the conviction that they are fighting in league with eternity, and to its opponents the feeling that they are defying inexorable fate. It is therefore inescapable that as long as our destiny is in the hands of moderate politicians of the middle way, sagely practicing the art of the possible, we will go on bowing to “the inevitable.”

The only opposite force that can defeat the coercive power of the State is the force of the spirit: it is the only force that is not, and can never be, its puppet. The chief reason that it is our only defense against totalitarianism is that it is impossible to cure the world’s evil until we cure first the evil within ourselves.

This is why, as I said at the beginning, the spiritual

search now going on for some way out of the trap is closely related to our political predicament. It is in fact our main hope for getting free. If our culture is to be made whole, our society must be made whole. And if our society is to be made whole, each individual must be made whole. Society can never be more than the sum of its individuals.

Can this be done? If it can, *how* can it be done? And what evidence is there that people want it to be done? The last question is the most easily answered. If we lift our eyes from the manifestations of the disintegrating culture of our society to those of the spiritual search, now going on, the landscape is instantly seen to be radiant with countless beacons of hope. It is true that most of these manifestations are rubbish, but the rubbish of a society's mind is as revealing as the rubbish it puts in its garbage cans. If there are bones and bottles in the latter it is evidence that somebody has been eating and drinking. If there are attempts to find harmony in the former, it is no less evidence that somebody's spirit has been eating the food of the gods and drinking at the fountain of life.

The two dominant strains in our search for a thread to guide us through the labyrinth are first, the vague and inchoate longing for some kind—any kind—of extra dimension in the universe, and second, the hunger for order (which is, after all, another word for harmony).

The eager longing of our time, born as it is of misery, thwarted hopes, and a growing will to explore and experience the truth, can lead into strange paths—and this poses a danger that accompanies the beginnings of everything great. Yet it can no longer be stifled. Our age is still profoundly atheistic; but religious belief is spreading. The more obvious it becomes that the trivial preoccupations of our daily life cannot satisfy our deepest need, the more the religious spark is transformed into a positive force for a new philosophy of life.

And it is only such a new philosophy of life based on the eternal but forgotten truths about man that can save individual freedom. What this means is that individual freedom can only be saved by a revolution. But this time a revolution with no arms, blood, or cruelty: a revolution of the human spirit. "The turn toward inward development," writes Solzhenitsyn, "the triumph of inwardness over outwardness, will be a great turning point in the history of mankind, comparable to the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. There will be a complete change, not only in the direction of interests and activities, but in the very nature of human beings (a change from spiritual dispersal to spiritual concentration), and a greater change still in the character of human societies." It will be a great change indeed, a great turning point. Nothing else will do.

Hillsdale College is marked by its strong independence and its emphasis on academic excellence. It holds that the traditional values of Western civilization, especially including the free society of responsible individuals, are worthy of defense. In maintaining these values, the college has remained independent throughout its 131 years, neither soliciting nor accepting government funding for its operations.