
Developing Human Potential in Civil Society

Some perspective on the possibility and need to develop human potential in a new type of civil society can be gleaned from these excerpts from Parapolitics by Raghavan Iyer. The assumption that modern capitalism can generate a change in an adolescent culture and transform human behavior is questioned. The call for a radical rethinking of social philosophy and cultural health offers a timely opportunity to current issues of social disintegration and economic inequality.

“In envisaging a new social structure, we may think of progress chiefly as the continuous extension of the avenues of opportunity for decision, experiment and fulfillment. Rationality of organization means simply that there should be less waste and better use of human potentials. The egalitarian principle requires us not merely to match rewards with deserts, but also to respect the fact that every man carries an aura of uncertainty and unknown potentialities around him. Since we cannot agree about the end of human development, we have no right to exclude anyone from the opportunity to share in the process, still less from the freedom to determine his own ends and to make his own decisions. Society’s judgments of success and failure are pretentious and costly if they are more than provisional. They may even be irrelevant to a man’s inward vision of growth and fulfillment. The ideal of fraternity implies the capacity and need in individuals to recognize and identify with the achievements of others, and to empathize with their weaknesses and failure. Education is the unfolding among receptive individuals of the capacity to choose effectively, to set themselves their standards of excellence, to exemplify tolerance and civility in relation to others, to identify with the achievements and failures of those near at hand and of persons everywhere, and to see life as a process of continuous self-education.” (P. 305)

“If cultural adolescence could be ascribed to modern capitalism itself, to the business ethic and the Moloch of work, the mere availability of leisure could not elevate contemporary values. But if cultural adolescence cannot be explained wholly in terms of modern capitalism, any vision of social transformation will require a radical rethinking of the conventional wisdom. The wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world may be the poorest in what was supremely precious to the highest cultures of classical antiquity and the renaissances of world history – the availability of time for thought and contemplation, for relaxation and creative work, for conversation and study, for love and friendship, for the enjoyment of the arts and the beauties of nature, for solitude and communion, for doubts and dreams. There is little room or time for indolence or excellence, for salons and coffeehouses and the marketplaces, for laughter and tears, for poetry and philosophy, for song and dance and worship, for birds and beasts, for sleep and convalescence, for birth and death, time to live and enough time to dwell on eternity. Can the mere availability for more time teach the most time-saving society in history how to spend time, how to transcend it, and how to appreciate timelessness? If the greatest souls from the largely forgotten cultures of antiquity were suddenly to descend upon the contemporary American scene, they would not begrudge its golden opportunities for ushering in a better future for itself and for mankind. They might freely concede that other societies gave too much to too few and not nearly enough to too many. They might rejoice that that this nation has already given more to instruct minds and to nourish bodies in larger numbers than any other country. For this reason alone, the American Republic deserves all its golden opportunities for enriching the lives of its citizens and educating them in varied ways of inspiring and serving the rest of mankind. But, in order to plan and prepare for the future, we must not shrink from calling things in the present by their proper names and learning all we can from the past. We must be deaf to the contemporary voice of America at least for awhile if we are to listen to earlier voices in American history, and learn from the highest cultures of antiquity and from the most primitive societies.” (P. 309)