

1973-06-07: [PARADIGM] Paradigm Theory

To find areas in historical institutions which have the same quality of having been superseded as scientific paradigms are superseded, I must distinguish certain qualities of those institutions which cause them to be rejected because they are as useless as old scientific notions, as foolish from the point of view of institutions now reigning as Ptolemy is in science. and finally somehow actually repugnant to a modern unless he adopts a completely historicist view and studies them with a purely detached intellectual curiosity. These conditions are not met by art literature, for they can be vigorously admired centuries and civilizations away from their creation, and indeed can be preferred to any contemporary paradigm. Nor can it apply to philosophy, for, much that parts of older philosophies are rejected, something remains that has enduring value and probably always will; so, one can accept Aristotle's work as unreservedly as Praxiteles', but, contrariwise, if one is to be learned in philosophy one must know and even apply directly much of Aristotle's philosophy, but one cannot be a connoisseur and care not at all for Praxiteles' work as more than an historical curiosity. It seems that I am saying that (in terms of contemporary affinities) in the fine arts the past paradigms are unreservedly acceptable or completely not so (and all grades in between); in philosophy neither un-reservedly acceptable nor completely rejectable; in science not acceptable and so necessarily rejected. (Continuities such as the use of mathematics, and carry-overs like that, are not in question as far as the basic paradigms are concerned.)

In such a framework, the role of historical investigation is quite complex. Historical knowledge per se can be gratifying as an intellectual feat of reconstruction of the past; and, as profession, that is its true *métier*. The value for the present of historical investigations is the question to be answered. In respect to the categories of the arts, philosophy and science put forth above, it must vary. Leaving aside the general satisfaction of reconstructing the history of one's civilization in a narrative form, after reconstructing its details--something that can be termed outright humanistic in so far as it gives every individual a sense of identification with the human past, but very dubious in its worth if taken by the individual as normative for his own behavior--the problem is to decide what things in the past which functioned for society in a fundamental way, and have their counterparts in our times, are to be regarded as utterly--and I mean utterly--dis-functional if they survive today. That is to say, in terms of the good and the just in social terms (or the true in science), they have been superseded and are inimical to the operation of society. One can use slavery as the benchmark for this kind of institution which one must reject today, though it is scarcely outside the memory of living men when it thrived in the Western world.

One characteristic of this class of superseded institutions which links them with scientific paradigms, and separates them from the arts and so forth, is that it presumes an idea of progress. For, no matter how much one says that the Ptolemaic system was an achievement of intellect that was perfectly workable over several millenia, the fact that it has been superseded means that its successor is clearly superior in terms of truth. So, in the class of superseded institutions, one might even accept the function of slavery as serving well certain societies which became major contributors to the advancement of civilization, but the fact that it is now inconceivable for any advanced society shows that the prohibition of it is a greater good. One must, therefore, declare one's belief in some fundamental progress of society's organization at the outset. This does not include the arts. Indeed, it is often probably the conviction that the arts cannot be seen progressively that leads historians to say that institutional arrangements of past society should not be viewed that way either. This is true to the extent that it is anachronistic to say that some

institution in the past was not doing as we do today (if today's ways are more useful and just); but it is not true that one cannot adopt a stance of belief in present-day institutions and say about some past equivalents that they are distinctly inferior. Some will say, but this is an obvious and trivial matter, since everyone knows that history is change and that some changes must be taken as for the better. What avails it to dwell upon the feeble parts of the past if the main function of history is to escape silly judgments? It is, in fact, detrimental to history as utility to adopt a negative attitude towards past institutions, for one is then tacitly valuing only the present.

The answer to this attitude must lie first in distinguishing the past-oriented from the present-oriented study of history. In the first, the pitfall is anachronism, in the second it is smugness. Those who take the past-oriented point of view, and avoid all anachronism, tend to regard present-oriented historical study as insensitive and unsympathetic, self-justifying, dogmatic, and arbitrary. (Present-oriented historians, on the other hand, tend to regard past-oriented ones as simply antiquarians.) The best example of present-oriented historiography which actually has these characteristics is Marxist. Marxists impose moral judgments freely upon past institutions, for they are concerned to show a progressive developmental chain towards a higher and better system. No acceptance of a past paradigm as justified in and of itself, for each paradigm is just a stage. But the present-oriented historian need not be a Marxist, or the equivalent in possessing (or being possessed by) a certitude of historical development including the past, present and future; he may simply say that there are ways in which basic institutional forms of society over time have been differently--i.e., paradigmatically--organized, and that, in terms of the right and the just, the series of them can be said to show the improvement of social conditions. This improvement is not amenable to a metaphysical system, for it may be more by chance than by design that the paradigm changed at all, and the present institutions may or may not be the best that man will ever achieve. The main reason to dwell upon the series, and to stress the element of progress in addition to the obvious aspect of change, is to condition one to see survivals of the past paradigm, usually in some sublimated form, that are sapping the vitality of the new paradigm and so troubling society in the present.

This brings up the question of survivals and innovations as objects of historical study. I contend that the disposition of most past-oriented historians to study innovations makes them in fact more committed, secretly, to the idea of progress than I believe present-oriented historians should be openly. The series of the new things that appear in history, the element of creative imagination that shows in institutions as well as in the arts, at least shows the ingeniousness of humankind, and I feel that those who dwell on this fact are hiding some kind of belief in true progress via enrichment of the stock of human creations even if they deny there is any valid lexical arrangement of the elements of the growing stock that would give a clear picture of progress as it is classically defined. There is, per se, nothing wrong with this--indeed it is exemplary humanistic belief.

The aspect of survivals in history is much less studied, and its utility is not at all as clear. To see it clearly, one should perhaps distinguish between the elements that survive and revitalized, going from the old paradigm to the new one, and those that die. Good humanistic understanding of creative innovations always takes account of the continuities, and rejuvenations, of older forms. I think, however, that this usually means peripheral forms, not substantive elements, for the very idea of paradigmatic shift implies a re-ordering of fundamentals; even if undeniably clear survivals in style in art (for example) can be shown, it is subordinated to the greater importance of the new style. Survivals in this sense, therefore, should be seen as in the minor key.

The things that actually die from one paradigm to the next, especially in institutions, which concern me, tend to die unnoticed. It is implicit in the new paradigm that something fundamental has changed, but one is mainly interested in the creative innovation than in the moribund survival. It is usually assumed that the old paradigm had a kind of life cycle, so that by the end its manifestations were feeble; what finally died should be taken as beyond regret because a bright new form had taken its place. But if we were to concentrate on the things that died, and compare them with their erstwhile conjoint partners that survived into the new paradigm, we have to ask ourselves whether or not the demise (thinking now of socio-economic institutions, expressly) is not a fact of as great importance as the new form that appeared. For the fact that the old form was moribund in some functional sense, for the society, may be less important than the fact that in some higher philosophical sense it had ceased to be useful because the inequities within in (seen retrospectively) were no longer justifiable in terms of the common good.

For the present-oriented historian, if he assumes that institutions are always designed to serve the common good, and that the series of them within a certain class shows a betterment of society, the stages in the betterment are marked best by the demise of the superseded forms. If they have disappeared completely, *tant mieux*. If, however, they survive in some minor form, or transmuted, the supposed betterment of society by the basic new paradigm may be compromised. In the actualities of historical development, where paradigmatic changes are slow and the complexities of old and new are more the rule than the exception, it may not be worthwhile to worry about such survivals of old paradigms if one sees that they did in fact continue to decline in significance within the age of the new paradigm. The element of tradition will always make some things last long beyond their due life. It is when the old form, presumably superseded as an institutional way of maintaining the common good, takes new life in the new paradigm, that one must be wary. There may be new rationalizations for its propriety, or even some old rationalizations that have not lost vigor (for the betterment of society is not the only frame of reference for institutions, or even the one that most people are capable of discerning), and one must decide whether the new function of the old form is properly justified or not.

The present-oriented historian, when acting as a watchdog to see that outmoded institutional forms have not somehow survived to the serious detriment of the new and better paradigm of social institutions, performs on a moral-philosophical level the kind of debunking and exposing operation that is his normal professional *métier* when investigating popular myths. It is a serious business, intensely committed to the right ordering of contemporary society but have presumably (if carried out well) in a rigorous scientific spirit and not polemically. It says, in brief: there exist institutional forms today which were once the only device of mankind to sustain advanced society but have presumably been superseded by our present system. Need we tolerate their survival, or should we decide they are dysfunctional and finally have an end to them.

Such is my concern with the transmission of political and economic power by inheritance.