

Disobedience to the law, civil and criminal, has become a mass phenomenon in recent years, not only in America, but also in a great many other parts of the world. The defiance of established authority, religious and secular, social and political, as a world-wide phenomenon may well one day be accounted the outstanding event of the last decade. Indeed, « the laws seem to have lost their power. » (1) Viewed from the outside and considered in historical explicit sign of the inner instability and vulnerability of existing governments and legal systems—could be imagined. If history teaches anything about the causes of revolution—and history does not teach much, but still teaches considerably more than social-science theories—it is that a disintegration of political systems precedes revolutions, that the telling symptom of disintegration is a progressive erosion of governmental authority, and that this erosion is caused by the government's inability to function properly, from which spring the citizens' doubts about its legitimacy. This is what the Marxists used to call a « revolutionary situation »—which, of course, more often than not does not develop into a revolution.

[...]

« Things of this world are in so constant a flux that nothing remains long in the same state. » (2) If this sentence, written by Locke about three hundred years ago, were uttered today, it would sound like the understatement of the century. Still, it may remind us that change is not a modern phenomenon, but is inherent in a world inhabited and established by human beings, who come into it, by birth, as strangers and newcomers (the new ones, as the Greeks used to call the young), and depart from it just when they have acquired the experience and familiarity that may in certain rare cases enable them to be « wise » in the ways of the world. « Wise men » have played various and sometimes significant roles in human affairs, but the point is that they have always been old men, about to disappear from the world. Their wisdom, acquired in the proximity of departure, cannot rule a world exposed to the constant onslaught of the inexperience and « foolishness » of newcomers, and it is likely that without this interrelated condition of natality and mortality, which guarantees change and makes the rule of wisdom impossible, the human race would have become extinct long ago out of unbearable boredom.

Change is constant, inherent in the human condition, but the velocity of change is not. It varies greatly from country to country, from century to century. Compared with the coming and going of the generations, the flux of the world's things occurs so slowly that the world offers an almost stable habitat to those who come and stay and go. Or so it was for thousands of years—including the early centuries of the modern age, when first the notion of change for change's sake, under the name of progress, made its appearance. Ours is perhaps the first century in which the speed of change in the things of the world has outstripped the change of its inhabitants. (An alarming symptom of this turnabout is the steadily shrinking span of the generations. From the traditional standard of three or four generations to a century, which corresponded to a « natural » generation gap between fathers and sons, we have now come to the point where four or five years of difference in age are sufficient to establish a gap between the generations.) But even under the extraordinary conditions of the twentieth century, which make Marx's admonition to change the world sound like an exhortation to carry coals to Newcastle, it can hardly be said that man's appetite for change has canceled his need for stability. It is well known that the most radical revolutionary will become a conservative on the day after the revolution. Obviously, neither man's capacity for change nor his capacity for preservation is boundless, the former being limited by the extension of the past into the present—no man begins ab ovo—and the latter by the

EN - n°3

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unpredictability of the future. Man's urge for change and his need for stability have always balanced and checked each other, and our current vocabulary, which distinguishes between two factions, the progressives and the conservatives, indicates a state of affairs in which this balance has been thrown out of order.

(1) Wilson Carey McWilliams, op. cit., p.211

(2) Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, No. 157