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NEGATIVISM AS A FACTOR IN UNITED STATES HISTORY

by Arend D. Lubbers

I WANT TO SHARE WITH YOU TODAY SOMETHING THAT HAS FOR ME BECOME AN OVERWHELMING CONCERN. I AM CONVINCED AT THIS POINT THAT A SINGLE HISTORICAL FACTOR IS INCREASINGLY SHAPING THE CONTEXT OF OUR LIVES IN THE UNITED STATES. THIS FACTOR IS WHAT I CALL "NEGATIVISM".

AS A COLLEGE PRESIDENT, I SPEND MANY OF MY DAYS IN CONFERENCES WITH A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT PEOPLE TALKING ABOUT MANY DIFFERENT SUBJECTS. AS THE LAST FEW YEARS HAVE GONE BY, MORE AND MORE THE DOMINANT PART OF THESE CONVERSATIONS SEEMS TO FOCUS ON THE SUBJECT OF WHAT'S WRONG WITH SOCIETY, POLITICS, AND PEOPLE IN GENERAL. THE CONSTANT TOPIC OF CONVERSATION IS WHAT THE KIDS CALL "HANG-UPS". SOMETIMES THE "HANG-UPS" ARE ON VERY PERSONAL MATTERS, SUCH AS HOW THE SOCIETY HAS REPRESSED NATURAL SEXUAL OUTLETS, AND SOMETIMES THE "HANG-UPS" ARE VERY GENERAL ONES SHARED BY MILLIONS OF PEOPLE, LIKE THE WAR IN VIET NAM. THESE "HANG-UPS" ARE VERY DOMINANT FACTORS IN HOW A PERSON, OR HOW A GROUP OF PERSONS, WILL ACT UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES. TODAY ACTION-DOMINATING AND FORCING HANG-UPS HAVE COME TO SERIOUSLY THREATEN POSITIVE VOICES AND ACTIVITIES, AND THEY HAVE LEAD TO DISSENT, PROTEST, AND ALIENATION.

I CONTEND THAT THIS NEGATIVE CONTEXT IN AMERICAN SOCIETY IS SOMETHING MUCH DIFFERENT THAN WE HAVE EVERY FACED BEFORE. IN THE PAST, AMERICA
HAS ALWAYS BEEN CHARACTERIZED BY ITS GREAT OPTIMISM. PHILOSOPHER ROBERT HEILBRONER IN HIS WELL-KNOWN BOOK, THE FUTURE AS HISTORY, WAS ONE OF THE FIRST TO HISTORICALLY DOCUMENT THIS FACT. EVEN IN THE 1930'S THE UNDERLYING HOPE AND EXPECTATION THAT THINGS WOULD GET BETTER HELPED THE UNITED STATES ENTRENCH AND SURVIVE A GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE EMERGENCE OF A TREMENDOUS WORLD WAR. I GUESS I MIGHT GET MY POINT ACROSS BEST BY ASKING A RHETORICAL QUESTION: WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED TO THE UNITED STATES DURING THE DEPRESSION IF THE ATTITUDES THAT PREVAILED THEN WERE THE ONES THAT PREVAIL NOW? I SUSPECT OUR NATURE'S SURVIVAL COULD HAVE BEEN SERIOUSLY THREATENED.

AS I SPEAK, THE ERA OF STUDENT PROTEST AND STUDENT DISSENT NATURALLY COMES TO EVERYONE'S MIND. BUT EVEN THOUGH I AM GOING TO CONCENTRATE ON THE MORE CONSPICUOUS AND EASIER DEFINED YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN NEGATIVISM, I WANT TO MAKE CLEAR THAT I AM TALKING ABOUT A NATIONAL PHENOMENON. AS A MATTER OF FACT, IN ORDER TO PREVENT ANY OF US FROM TOO EASILY SETTLING BACK AND BLAMING EVERYTHING ON THE YOUNGSTERS, WHICH BY THE WAY IS ANOTHER FORM OF NEGATIVISM PREVALENT IN OUR SOCIETY, I AM GOING TO HYPOTHESIZE THAT THE KIDS HAVE INHERITED MUCH OF THEIR BITTERNESS FROM THEIR ELDERS. A SOCIOLOGIST'S LOOK AT AMERICA IN THE LAST GENERATION ILLUSTRATES THE SOURCE OF NEGATIVISM IN OUR YOUTH.
YOUNGSTERS TODAY ENTER A PENT-UP AND FRUSTRATED LIFE THAT IS FAR FROM BEING PSYCHOLOGICALLY HEALTHY. YOUNG PEOPLE FIND A SOCIETY TANTALIZED BY GIMMICKS AND ENTERTAINMENT THAT ONLY THE MONEYED CAN ENJOY. THEY FIND HUGE METROPOLITAN AREAS FULL OF PEOPLE WHO DON'T LIKE TO LIVE IN METROPOLITAN AREAS AND SPEND THEIR FEW VACATION DAYS A YEAR FRANTICALLY ESCAPING FROM THE CITY IN ORDER TO CATCH A GLIMPSE OF A MOUNTAIN OR RIVER. THEY SEE FACTORY ASSEMBLY LINES WHERE WORKERS BECOME SEPARATED FROM THE PRODUCT THEY ARE MAKING AND AS A RESULT OFTEN FEEL ALIENATED FROM THEIR WORK. THEY FIND A SOCIETY SO MOBILE THAT FEW PEOPLE HAVE ANY PLACE THAT THEY CAN CALL HOME. THEY SEE OUR TEEMING GHETTOS WHERE EVEN SURVIVAL IS DIFFICULT. OUR YOUNG SEE A NATION WITH A FANTASTIC ABUNDANCE OF NATURAL RESOURCES THAT HAS SQUANDERED TOO MUCH OF ITS NATURAL WEALTH IN A PERIOD OF A FEW GENERATIONS. THEY SEE A NATION THAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE WORLD SPOKESMAN FOR PEACE, FIGHTING A WAR IN INDO CHINA FOR REASONS THAT CAN ONLY BE VAGUELY EXPLAINED. CHILDREN FIND THAT HUMAN LOVE HAS AN ATTEMPTED REPLACEMENT IN MATERIAL BRIBES. YOUNG FOLKS LOOK AT SUCCESSFUL FATHERS WHO ARE SOCIETAL SUCCESSES AND CONSIDER THEM FAILURES, BECAUSE EVEN IF THE FATHER HAS ATTAINED PERSONAL WEALTH HE HAS NOT ACQUIRED SELF-SATISFACTION, FULFILLMENT OR HAPPINESS. SAUL BELLOW, ONE OF AMERICA'S BEST NOVELISTS, FREQUENTLY DOCUMENTS THIS SOURCE OF NEGATIVISM IN THE SOCIETY. LET ME QUOTE FROM BELLOW'S SEIZE THE DAY AS HE PORTRAYS THE FEELINGS OF A METROPOLITAN BUSINESSMAN AT A MEETING:
"UCH! HOW THEY LOVE MONEY, THOUGHT WILHELM. THEY ADORE MONEY! HOLY MONEY! BEAUTIFUL MONEY! IT WAS GETTING SO THAT PEOPLE WERE FEEBLE-MINDED ABOUT EVERYTHING EXCEPT MONEY. WHILE IF YOU DIDN'T HAVE IT YOU WERE A DUMMY, A DUMMY! YOU HAD TO EXCUSE YOURSELF FROM THE FACE OF THE EARTH. CHICKEN! THAT'S WHAT IT WAS. THE WORLD'S BUSINESS. IF ONLY HE COULD FIND A WAY OUT OF IT".

SO YOU SEE THAT NEGATIVISM IN AMERICA, WHILE MOST OVERTLY EXPRESSED BY THE YOUNG, IS A PRODUCT OF THE WHOLE SOCIETY, AND HAS BEEN GROWING STEADILY DURING THE LAST GENERATION. AS WE FACE THESE SOCIETAL PROBLEMS, THE "ESTABLISHMENT" AGAINST WHICH THE KIDS REBEL IS GUILTY OF ITS OWN BRAND OF NEGATIVISM ... A MUCH MORE SILENT, SOPHISTICATED KIND. ONE OF THE ASPECTS OF THIS NEGATIVISM ON OUR PART HAS BEEN OUR UNWILLINGNESS TO CHANGE OUR STRUCTURE AND OUR SURROUNDINGS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF TWENTIETH CENTURY. WE CLUTCH VAINLY AT THE THINGS OF THE PAST, AND CAUSTICALLY DISMISS OUR CRITICAL YOUNGSTERS AS IMMATURE OR AS "HIPPIE-CREEPS". AND GRADUALLY, AS THEIR VOICES GROW LESS MEANINGFUL AND THEIR CRITICISM HAS NO EFFECT, THEY BECOME MORE NEGATIVISTIC AND MORE HARSH AND THUS SEEM EVEN MORE UNREALISTIC TO US. SO WE ENTRENCH OURSELVES EVEN MORE AND WE IN TURN SOUND EVEN MORE UNREALISTIC TO THEM. THE RESULT IS THAT A GREAT CHASM HAS GROWN IN AMERICA BETWEEN THE ALIENATED THE YOUNG, AND THE MINORITIES ON ONE HAND, THE MONEYED, ESTABLISHED, AND SECURE PEOPLE ON THE OTHER HAND. AND ON BOTH ENDS THE NEGATIVISM
IS CONTINUALLY GROWING.

A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF WHAT IS HAPPENING TO AMERICA WAS THE 1968 ELECTION. ONE OF THE CANDIDATES WAS THE EVER HOPEFUL AND OPTIMISTIC HUBERT HUMPHREY, WHOSE BRILLIANCE AND GOOD HUMOR AS A UNITED STATES SENATOR HELPED THE UNITED STATES MEET MANY A CRISIS. BUT IN 1968, WHEN HUMPHREY BEGAN HIS CAMPAIGN ON WHAT HE CALLED THE "POLITICS OF JOY" HIS WORDS FELL ON DEAF EARS, AND EVEN RAISED MUCH HOSTILITY, PARTICULARLY IN THE YOUNG. HUMPHREY FOUND OUT THE HARD WAY THE TREMENDOUS NEGATIVISM THAT PERVADERS THE SOCIETY.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE NATIONAL STATE OF PESSIMISM CAN BE FOUND IN ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR MUSICAL PLAYS OF THIS ERA; "HAIR." LET ME QUOTE A FEW LINES FROM THE CENTRAL SONG OF THE PLAY:

"WE STOP, LOOK, AT ONE ANOTHER
SHORT OF BREATH
WALKING PROUDLY IN OUR WINTER COATS
WEARING SMELLS OF LABORATORIES,
FACING A DYING NATION
A MOVING PAPER FANTASY
LISTENING FOR THE NEW TOLD LIES".

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT PALL HAS FALLEN ON THE COLLEGE CAMPUS. ALEXANDER HEARD, THE PRESIDENT'S ADVISOR ON YOUTH RELATIONS RECENTLY SUBMITTED A REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT. LET ME SUMMARIZE THE FRIGHTENING CONTENT
OF THAT REPORT. LARGE NUMBERS OF STUDENTS WHO WOULD NORMALLY BE MODERATE
AND CONSERVATIVE HAVE BECOME ANTAGONISTIC. HE QUOTES A UNIVERSITY OF
MINNESOTA REGENT AS SAYING THAT "WE FIND AMONG OUR BRIGHT, HARD-WORKING
AMBITION, WELL-READ STUDENTS A WIDESPREAD DISTRUST OF THEIR GOVERN-
MENT, A GROWING DESPAIR ABOUT THE POLITICAL PROCESS, A MIXTURE OF FEAR
AND RESENTMENT TOWARD AMERICA'S LEADERSHIP". MR. HEARD FURTHER CONCLUDED
THAT "THE SELF-IDENTIFICATION OF COLLEGE STUDENTS AS A SEPARATE CLASS
IN SOCIETY IS ASSUMING EXTRAORDINARY PROPORTIONS"..." THE MOST
IMPORTANT SOURCE OF DESPAIR FOUND BY HEARD IN HIS EXTENSIVE INTERVIEWS
AND SURVEYS WAS THE APPARENT INEFFECTIVENESS OF OUR INSTITUTIONS IN
SOLVING THE GREAT PROBLEMS OF THE DAY. HEARD BELIEVES A MOST URGENT
NOTE IS REQUIRED IN MEETING THIS PESSIMISM GROWING IN THE COLLEGE STUDENTS,
WHO ARE THE LEADERS OF TOMORROW.

TODAY AMERICA'S BIGGEST PROBLEM HAS BECOME THE "PROBLEM PROBLEM". THE
MOST VICIOUS PART OF THE PROBLEM PROBLEM IS THAT IT LEADS TO DIVISIONS
AND HOSTILITIES THAT KEEP US FROM SOLVING THE DIFFICULTIES THAT LED
TO THE PROBLEMS IN THE FIRST PLACE, AND AS THE PROBLEMS CONTINUE
UNSOLVED, THE NEGATIVISM IN TURN GETS WORSE. WE ARE IN WHAT COULD BE
CORRECTLY LABELED AS "A VICIOUS CIRCLE" OF EVENTS.

LET ME POINT TO SOME OF THE SICK THINGS THAT ACCRUE FROM THE VICIOUS
CIRCLE OF NEGATIVISM. THE FIRST ASPECT IS THAT INSTEAD OF "EMPHASIZING
THE POSITIVE AND DE-EMPHASIZING THE NEGATIVE" WE DO JUST THE REVERSE. 
WE DWELL UPON OUR PROBLEMS SO MUCH THAT THEY SEEM SO DISPROPORTIONATELY 
LARGE AND OVERWHELMING, THAT THE RESULTANT TENDENCY IS TO AVOID THEM. 
AN EXAMPLE OF THIS IS THE TENDENCY BY THE AMERICAN MEDIA TO DWELL UPON 
STUDENT DISSENT AND MAGNIFY A SMALL DEMONSTRATION COMPLETELY OUT OF 
PROPORTION. 

ANOTHER SICK RESULT OF NEGATIVISM IS THAT IT CREATES PROBLEMS EVEN 
WHEN THERE AREN'T REAL ONES. A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF THIS WAS 
STRIKE LEADER [REDACTED], WHO PURPORTEDLY CONTENDED THAT HE 
REALLY WAS NOT THAT FAMILIAR WITH THE REASONS FOR THE [REDACTED] STRIKE, 
AND THAT IF ONE ISSUE HAD NOT BEEN AT HAND, HE WOULD HAVE FOUND ANY 
OTHER CONVENIENT REASON FOR STRIKING THE UNIVERSITY. 

I OFTEN GET THE FEELING WHEN TALKING TO THE MOST ENTRENCHED STUDENT 
RADICALS TODAY THAT THEY DO NOT WANT THINGS TO TURN OUT RIGHT, NOR 
DO THEY WANT IMPROVEMENTS MADE. THEY ARE GOOD AND PRACTICED AT OPPOSITION 
AND CONTENTION BUT THEY ARE COMPLETELY OUT OF THEIR ELEMENT IN CONSTRUCTION 
OR IMPROVEMENT. NEGATIVISM YOU SEE, HAS BECOME A FASHION AT COLLEGES 
AND UNIVERSITIES. WHAT STARTED OUT A VERY LEGITIMATE ETHICALLY BASED 
PROTEST AGAINST OVERLY PATERNALISTIC AND RIGID UNIVERSITY RULES HAS 
NOW BECOME DISCONTENT AIMED AT NOT ONLY EVERY REAL PROBLEM OF THE SOCIETY,
BUT EVERY FLAW IN HUMAN NATURE. STUDENT RADICALS TODAY BLAME EVERY
HUMAN PROBLEM INHERITED THROUGH THE CENTURIES ON THE "ESTABLISHMENT"
AND THE "SYSTEM". ONCE THESE FALSE CORRELATIONS BEGIN TO BE ACCEPTABLE
TO A STUDENT DISSIDENT, HIS NEGATIVISM HAS BECOME A SICKNESS.

AS NEGATIVISM HAS BECOME A SICKNESS, UNDERMINING REASON, WE HAVE LOST
TRACK OF A FUNDAMENTAL FACT OF HUMAN LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES.
I AM SPEAKING OF THE FACT THAT THINGS ARE NOT REALLY SO BAD AS THEY
SEEM. THERE IS EVIDENCE THAT MANY THINGS ARE SUBSTANTIALLY IMPROVING.
FORTUNATELY, I DON'T HAVE TO RELY SOLELY ON MY OWN INTERPRETATION.
MY POINTS ARE CORRBORATED BY THE TEXT OF AN ADDRESS GIVEN BY DANIEL
P. MOYNIHAN, COUNSELOR TO THE PRESIDENT, AT HENDRIX COLLEGE, ON APRIL
6, 1970.

MR. MOYNIHAN SAID AND I QUOTE; "THE FACT IS THAT IN OUR EAGERNESS TO
DRAW ATTENTION TO PROBLEMS, WE DO FREQUENTLY TEND TO MAKE THEM SEEM
WORSE THAN THEY ARE. IN PARTICULAR WE TEND TO DEPICT THINGS AS
WORSENING WHEN IN FACT THEY ARE IMPROVING". MR. MOYNIHAN CITED THE
EXAMPLE OF RACE RELATIONS. THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN SURVEY RESEARCH
CENTER RECENTLY DISCLOSED INFORMATION AND I QUOTE: "THE WHITE BACKLASH
AND THE DETERIORATION OF WHITE AND BLACK ATTITUDES TOWARD INTEGRATION
WHICH HAVE BEEN NOTED BY MANY SOCIAL OBSERVERS DO NOT SHOW UP IN THE
FINDINGS OF A RECENT SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER NATIONWIDE SURVEY. THERE
IS EVIDENCE THAT IN SOME RESPECTS, BLACKS AND WHITES ARE IN CLOSER AND MORE FRIENDLY CONTACT THAN THEY HAD BEEN FOUR YEARS EARLIER". MOYNIHAN FURTHER POINTS OUT THAT OVER THE LAST YEARS A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT PROGRAMS, CRITICIZED THOUGH THEY MAY BE, HAVE BOTH HELPED MILLIONS OF DEPRIVED AND DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE AND HAVE EVEN MORE IMPORTANTLY SET THE PRECEDENT AND GAINED THE EXPERIENCE TO HELP MILLIONS MORE IN THE COMING DECADE.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE WITH WHICH EVERY MAN IN THIS ROOM IS FAMILIAR IS THE CONTINUING IMPROVEMENT OF THE WORKING MAN IN THE AMERICAN SOCIETY. THE BENEFITS OF AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY HAVE BEEN IN THE LAST YEARS EVER MORE EVENLY DISTRIBUTED TO THE MILLIONS OF WORKING MEN ACROSS THE SOCIETY WHO HAVE MADE THIS COUNTRY AND BUILT WHAT WE CONSIDER ITS HERITAGE. IN EDUCATION FANTASTIC PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE NOT ONLY IN THE KIND OF TEACHING DONE, AND THE MATERIAL BEING TAUGHT, BUT IN PROVIDING THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR MORE AND MORE STUDENTS FROM ALL BACKGROUNDS TO ATTEND COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES.

LET ME SUMMARIZE MY REMARKS. OUR SOCIETY HAS PROBLEMS, THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT ABOUT THAT. SOME OF THESE PROBLEMS ARE SERIOUS. THESE PROBLEMS HAVE EMERGED LARGELY BECAUSE WE ARE A NATION IN GREAT CHANGE. WE ARE A YOUNG NATION GOING THROUGH THE PROCESS OF MATURING. WE HAVE BEEN A RURAL NATION AND WE ARE NOW BECOMING AN URBAN ONE. WE HAVE
BEEN AN EXPANDING NATION AND NOW WE HAVE REACHED THE TIME OF INTERNAL CONSOLIDATION. ALL OF THESE THROES OF HISTORY ARE NATURAL AND UNDERSTANDABLE, BUT IN AMERICA GROWING PAINS HAVE SUDDENLY BECOME A TREMENDOUS NATIONAL CRISIS. FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS A HISTORICAL MOVEMENT OF NEGATIVISM HAS EMERGED IN TO OUR PERIOD OF CONSOLIDATION AND NOT ONLY PREVENTED THE SOLUTION OF MANY PROBLEMS, BUT AT THIS POINT THREATENS OUR VERY WELL-BEING. BEFORE ANY OF OUR SOCIETAL PROBLEMS WILL BE SOLVED, WE MUST FIRST SOLVE THIS PROBLEM OF NEGATIVISM.

I RECOMMEND THAT THE FIRST MOVE TO CONQUER THIS STATE OF DEPRESSION TAKE PLACE WHERE THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR DIRECTING THE SOCIETY LIES, IN THE HANDS OF THOSE IN POSITIONS OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL POWER. A HAND MUST BE EXTENDED TO OUR KIDS. NOT AN INGRATIATING HAND, NOT A PATRONIZING ONE, NOR ONE THAT PLAYS TO THEIR PASSIONS. WE MUST MOVE AS A SOCIETY TO TAKE THE WORDS OF OUR YOUNG SERIOUSLY. WE MUST INTEGRATE THEM INTO OUR SOCIETY'S POSITIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY. THEY MUST BE MADE PART OF THE PROCESS OF OUR EDUCATIONAL AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS. THE CHANNELS MUST BE OPENED ALL ACROSS OUR COUNTRY TO PERMIT CONSTRUCTIVE AND PRACTICAL OUTLETS FOR OUR YOUTHS' ADMIRABLE HUMANISTIC GOALS. I SEE THE FIRST STEPS IN THIS DIRECTION BEING TAKEN BY OUR UNIVERSITIES IN INTEGRATING STUDENTS INTO THE POLICY-MAKING COUNCILS. I SEE OTHER STEPS BEING TAKEN IN ALLOWING 18 YEAR OLDS TO VOTE. I SEE OTHER MOVES IN ENCOURAGING YOUTH TO CAMPAIGN FOR CANDIDATES. THESE CHANGES AND A THOUSAND MORE LIKE THEM CAN TURN THE TIDE OF NEGATIVISM INTO A POSITIVE MOVEMENT TO HUMANISTICALLY DEVELOP AMERICAN SOCIETY.
AT THE SAME TIME, WE MUST RESIST PANDERING TO COERCIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE
ATTEMPTS TO FURTHER DRAG OUR SOCIETY INTO A NO-MANS LAND OF HANG-UPS
PROBLEMS, AND PSYCHOSIS. A HEALTHY SOCIETY CANNOT BE BUILT BY BOWING
TO UNHEALTHY PASSIONS AND DEMENTED MISPERCEPTIONS OF REALITY. WHAT
I AM PAINTING HERE IS A VERY DELICATE BALANCE THAT MUST BE REACHED,
AND IT MUST BE REACHED SOON AS PRESIDENTIAL ADVISOR HEARD HAS DOCUMENTED.
WE DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME TO CLEAR OUR FOG OF NEGATIVISM AND BEGIN THE
LONG-POSTPONED SOLUTIONS TO OUR SOCIETY'S PROBLEMS. HISTORY, WE KNOW,
WILL NOT WAIT LONG FOR US.