AUTHORITY, REASON, AND THE CIVILIZING PROCESS

A Polemic Against de Swaan

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One sign of the strength of the New Class is its ability to pacify or create its own intellectuals whose social theories interpret and justify the ascendancy and hegemony of the technical intelligentsia. One such ideology, clearly argued by de Swaan, represents and affirms the New Class’ restructuring of the civilizing process. De Swaan’s theory of the civilizing process delegitimates traditional bourgeois culture with its stern moral authority and cultural repression, while legitimating egalitarian and consciously-negotiated relationships guided by the therapeutic logic of the helping professions. Also, the moral and critical reason of humanistic (or traditional) intellectuals, such as the Frankfurt School’s “dialectic of enlightenment” thesis or Lasch’s “narcissism” thesis, is seen as historically regressive and culturally oppressive, that is, as resonating bourgeois modes of authority and reason. De Swaan’s interpretation of the civilizing process is integral to the instrumental reason and therapeutic interests of the New Class as against the patriarchal authority of the bourgeoisie and the moral reason of humanistic intellectuals.

The importance of agoraphobia for de Swaan is that this psychic problem signifies both the difficulties and the limits of the bourgeoisie’s control of the civilizing process. The bourgeoisie initiated and led the civilizing process as the cultural project of industrial capitalism. Guided by the norms of the Enlightenment, reason and freedom were secularized, taken from their Olympian heights in religion and custom and rooted in the internalized conscience of the entrepreneur in the capitalist market. A new principle of authority and social control was invoked: that of the autonomous individual as bearer of substantive reason wherein the means provided by individualized resources were linked to the ends provided by internalized norms. The bourgeois ideal of the autonomous individual, freed from the constraints of external command and compliance, premised the self-regulation of institutions.

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through the internalization of moral and religious norms. Moral internalization, while self-denying and leading to compulsive if not neurotic behavior, mobilized the self for projects in the external world—family, work, industrial productivity, and social progress. Aside from the problem that the bourgeoisie could only limit its ideals of secularized reason and freedom within the autonomous entrepreneur and not the industrial working class, bourgeois culture also created new psychic problems and resistance among women within the patriarchal family. For historical reasons, accurately described by de Swaan, bourgeois women were domesticated within the home as mistresses for patriarchal husbands and nurturing mothers to children. Bourgeois men were patriarchs because of their commanding authority in industry and commerce, an authority reproduced within the home through the moral authority of the husband-father role. The social reproduction of the entrepreneur as autonomous individual required the dependence of the family on the father. For the children to become like the father and to perpetuate family control over property—the ultimate aim of bourgeois socialization—there had to be a long period of dependency wherein parental authority was psychically internalized. Bourgeois women experienced traumas, neuroses, and conflicts because of their dependent status at home. Given bourgeois domesticity, which imposed severe restrictions on the private and public behavior of women, it is not surprising that agoraphobia became an ailment common to women reentering public life.

Bourgeois paternalism and its ideal of autonomous individuality, limited as it was to the male entrepreneur and father, generated class conflict at the factory and sexual conflict within the home. These conflicts imposed limits to the bourgeoisie's reign over the civilizing process and help to explain the historic rise of the New Class. In contrast to viewing the rise of the New Class as an alliance between professionals and the bourgeoisie in response to the social interdependencies caused by modernism, de Swaan tacitly implies another motive. That is, on the cultural front, the New Class, especially the helping professionals allied with the liberal state, sought, and seems to have succeeded, to replace bourgeois modes of culture and socialization with therapeutically-rational modes. In part then, the rise of the New Class can be interpreted as a project to wrest control of the civilizing process away from the bourgeoisie, and thus to ameliorate the conflicts associated with bourgeois authority and culture. De Swaan portrays this process differently and in a manner which obfuscates the historic interests of the New Class against those of the bourgeoisie. In fact, he gives little theoretical attention to the processes which shift power away from the bourgeoisie to the New Class and shift culture away from moral internalization and self-compulsion to therapeutic negotiation and social compulsion. He alludes to the functional theory of modernism.