

The Source of Social Renewal

Immanuel Levinas, a philosopher and theologian of the last century, has left us in his essays and writings thoughts which bring to life the difficulties of finding a harmonious interaction between the individual, other individuals and the state. The question of the nature of the human being and of inborn and natural rights is working in him. He lived with the riddle which lives between the autonomy of the human individual and oppression. He paints a picture of the human being, as a unique being, as a being which is not comparable in any essential way with another. He looks out at the human species and sees it is a species of individuals who are species in themselves. He sees a species which is built not on commonality and conformity but on individuality. To look at another human being and see them as self-justifying, and at the same time irreplaceable, is to see the origin of the idea of human right. It then appears that the meaning of the human flows out of themselves! The desire grows to safe guard this self-determining will from encroachments, by fighting off the oppressive laws of government, by fighting the oppressive tendencies of fascism.

Levinas builds this image out and soon sees the picture which stands as an ideal transform in his mind into an image of war. The image of mutually exclusive wills, all demanding realization, all limiting each other. Here the place of the state appears and it limits humans so that they can enjoy the limited freedom which is available without sacrificing the freedom of others. The state places people in an order which secures a certain freedom. The state promises peace. The state appears as the fountain of order and goodness. Now the state appears as if it will provide law to the individuals it was to protect as their own lawgivers. Here the individual is again in the shadow of an external law, the individual is put in its place. Levinas is driven beyond this peace of the state. He cannot rest here. This picture is still an image of oppression for the state can never exhaust the realm of human individuality, can never exhaust the realm which must be protected. He comes through these reflections to recognize the inherent need of a domain which is totally independent of the state. This realm is to continually cultivate the living image of the human being. This is not a realm of politics, this is a realm of prophecy and spirituality.

Here Levinas discovers an image of the human being which brings reconciliation to the apparent battle between totally unique individuals. He points to the experience of perceiving another and, in that experience, being submerged in a state of self-forgetting where one feels responsible for the other. When you look at someone, and through their face feel their need as your responsibility, this fact appears. He points to this as the natural foundation of human consciousness. Love thy neighbor as thyself is a description of a primal aspect of human nature. To act freely out of this consciousness is to act freely for the other. Here the true individual, the unique being realizes itself in its responsibility for the other.

In the work of Levinas one can find how a sensitive personality came to terms with the deep questions of justice, the human being and the state. His life passed through the determining years for Europe, which unfolded during the last century. He comes to a view that the truly human must be cultivated outside of the state and that this will lead to the states best interest, namely peace.

If we follow the reflections of Levinas, we sense the path he takes and how he has come to take it. We cannot help but feel a desire to find out how there might be a practical application of this insight. How can one lead such reflections into a new form for society?

To turn toward the work of Rudolf Steiner is at the same time to feel closer to such a new form. In the beginning of the 20th century he promoted a view of society which he was convinced would lead to renewal. This view was that a realm had to be established where what was living in human beings as inspiration, morality and innovation could develop without being influenced by questions of economy or of the state. These would be areas of free cultural activity. Rudolf Steiner clearly articulates that human beings have truly good tendencies in themselves. He describes how these tendencies become destructive and evil when they cannot develop in a certain manner. When he looked out over Europe, which was passing through disasters, he saw that the state and the economy were retarding and thwarting the forces which were inherently good in human nature. He saw the only way to renewal, to a really healthy economy and healthy system of justice, was to create free space for the good impulses and inspirations living in humans to come to the surface. Culture had to be freed of the influence of those who were powerful in the economy and in the state. Thus he came to promote freedom, or self-determining autonomy, as the principle for a healthy culture. This was at the same time a freedom from being determined by the spirit that lives in the state, or in the economy.

A man named Emil Molt asked how he might help found such a free cultural life for the renewal of society. This led to one attempt which was the founding of the first Waldorf School.

This is not the place to develop a picture of a possible three-fold social order. I will not go into any of the practical indications which Steiner gave in the context of middle Europe 90 years ago. I have focused on his ideas on culture, its demands and its relation to the greater renewal of society. I have done this while noticing that a form of this picture has found expression in Immanuel Levinas. It may seem from what I have written that Rudolf Steiner lacked respect for politics and economy but I have only focused on a small facet of his three-fold ordering of human society. It is not that he denied the economy or the state respect. He simply gave them a place which would serve people best. He indicates what this place is in his writings and lectures.

He envisioned a society for people. He did not envision a people for a society, or a people for an economy. He saw that goodness was not essentially in the economy. He saw that goodness was not essentially in the state. Goodness is in the human being.