Contemporary Social and Cultural Crisis

By Dr. P. A. Sorokin, Professor of Sociology.

That Western society and culture are in the midst of a crisis is a commonplace observation. Less certain is what kind of crisis it is: Is it one of the ordinary crises through which Western society passed several times in the last century, or is it an extraordinary one which happens only once in several centuries? Most of the contemporary leaders seem to think it is ordinary, being either purely economic or purely political or a kind of some partial maladjustment. Accordingly they assure us it will be soon over, and prescribe, as “the way out of it”, a kind of surface rubbing medicine: an economic readjustment in money or banking or prices and wages; or similar modification of the political machinery and the party in power; or a reasonable religious reform in making churches more attractive; or changing here and there the curriculum of schools; or establishing sterilization of socially unfit persons. Through these and similar measures they expect to adjust the maladjustments and to end the crisis.

I admire the self-confidence and optimism of these doctors. And yet I cannot help thinking their diagnosis and prescriptions are doubtful. The contemporary crisis seems to me not ordinary, but extraordinary. It is not mere economic or political or partial maladjustment, but involves the whole of our culture and society. Its magnitude is immense. Its end is not yet in sight. And the way out of it is much more difficult than the doctors assure us.

We seem to live in one of the greatest turning points of human history, when one fundamental form of culture and society begins to decline, and another, different, form is coming.

Contemporary social and cultural building of the Western world has lived during the last five centuries—the building of a materialistic, utilitarian, and “everyday” culture that seeks perfection in this sensory world—building seems to be set to crumble. A new building is in the making, spiritual, dealistic, and less secular. And only looms in the horizon, but not yet as yet. We are in an uncertain period of the transition from one cultural epoch to another. Extraordinary character of our present times is clear.

Such is my diagnosis. What are the evidences for its validity? The evidence is given by the totalitarian states who view the crisis as an opportunity. Among these, the economic crisis is unmistakably the presence of an acute economic crisis. The politicians demonstrate clearly the grave political sickness in national and international relationships. Biologists assure us that the contemporary selection leads to the sickness of the unfit. Ministers, moralists, social judges explore the sinister side of their fields. Not infrequent are the cries of the rise of crime, philosophy, and religion. We sum up the testimony of the signs of the “ordinary crisis” which there is no compartment of our society which is left out. The crisis appears totalitarian and universal. Such is the first evidence for the diagnosis, or very doctors who view it as such.

The second class of evidence is given by the extraordinary magnificence, and bloodiness of wars and internal revolutions of the twentieth century. The systems of these problems show that in the twentieth century is the most turbulent century in the history of Western society. War and being the sharpest form of
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cent socio-cultural building in which the
Western world has lived during the last
five centuries—the building of resplendent
utilitarian, materialistic, sensate, and “this
worldly” culture that seeks happiness and
perfection in this sensory world only—this
building seems to be shattered and begins
to crumble. A new building of a more
spiritual, idealistic, and less sensual culture
only looms in the future, but is not built
as yet. We are in an uncomfortable posi-
tion of the transitory period from one soci-
cultural epoch to another. Hence the ex-
traordinary character of our crisis.

Such is my diagnosis. What are the
evidences for its validity? The first evi-
dence is given by the totality of the
doctors who view the crisis as ordinary.
Among these, the economic doctors show
unmistakably the presence of the most
acute economic crisis. The political doc-
tors demonstrate clearly the existence of a
great political sickness in national and in-
ternational relationships. Biologists and an-
thropologists assure us that the contempo-
rary selection leads to the survival of the
unfit. Ministers, moralists, educators, and
judges deplore the sinister symptoms in
their fields. Not infrequent are the voices
pointing out the crisis of creative art, sci-
ence, philosophy, and religion. Thus when
we sum up the testimony of all the parti-
sans of the “ordinary crisis view” we find
there is no compartment of our culture and
society which is sound and is not sick. The
crisis appears totalitarian and encyclopedic.
Such is the first evidence supplied by the
very doctors who view it as ordinary.

The second class of evidence is given
by the extraordinary magnitude, destruc-
tiveness, and bloodiness of international
wars and internal revolutions of the twen-
tieth century. The systematic studies of
these problems show that in this respect
the twentieth century is the most bloody
and turbulent century in the whole history
of Western society. War and revolution
being the sharpest form of anarchy, their
extraordinary magnitude in this century is
by itself a sufficient proof of the validity of
my diagnosis.

The third class of evidence is brought by
the present situation in the main compart-
ments of our culture and society. What-
ever compartment of our culture we take,
between, science, philosophy, religion, eth-
ics, law, or social institutions, we find in it
an open revolt against the dominant forms
and trends of the preceding centuries. They
all are in a state of chaos and anarchy.
All the standards and values are unsettled,
beginning with those of what is true and
false (in science, philosophy, religion);
what is right and wrong (in ethics and
law); what is beautiful and ugly (in art);
and ending with the chaotic state in all our
institutions, from the family, the property,
the state, to our churches, schools, courts,
and factories. All and everything is upset,
disorganized, and tends to be
ground to dust in the fantastically fast
and convulsive Niagara of feverish change.
Any adaptation to this dancing world in flux
becomes less and less possible. Before we
have time to adjust ourselves to the last
change, it is gone and is replaced by a new
change. In this mad flux, more and more
we are robbed of the security of our body,
of the peace of our mind, and of the integ-
ity of our personality. Incertitude and in-
security begin to permeate our life.

The fourth series of evidence is supplied
by the impotency and futility of all the
commendable efforts to fight the crisis.
During the last two decades innumerable
efforts have been made by the nations and
their leaders to eliminate war, anarchy,
poverty, depression, crime, and other mani-
festations of the crisis. And yet, the situ-
ation of the patient today is more ominous
than at any time before.

When these and many other evidences
are properly considered, my diagnosis ap-
ppears to be nearer to the reality than that
of the ordinary crisis.

Does this great crisis mean the death
of Western culture and society? It means
only a decline of one of their forms and
its coming replacement by another. This other form will be very different, but in its own way as great and magnificent as the declining form at its climax. I conjecture that the coming form will be more spiritual, more idealistic, more just, and more Godly than that on the decline. Insofar, there is no place for any pessimism in regard to the future of Western culture and society.

But before the new form is built, we must cross a dangerous transitional bridge from the present to the future form. Such transitory periods tend to be—the dies irae, dies illa—sterne, bloody, and destructive. It is the supreme duty of our and the next few generations to make the transition as little tragic as possible. One of the real means for that is an active effort of every individual to become wiser, nobler, and more just. Another means is an orderly re-orientation of the system of social values, making them less relative, more idealistic, and more absolute. The third means consists of an active effort of all social groups to abandon their petty conflicts and to unite in one great aspiration to make the passage painless and to build ever wiser, nobler, and more marvelous culture and society to come.

These means are certainly difficult, but they are the only ones that are helpful. Surface-rubbing medicine is easy, but impotent, as the experience of the last decades shows. It is up to every one of us as to what we make of this transition: a human inferno of the dies irae, dies illa, or a heroic deed of heroic humanity.

An Adventure in Translating Theocritus

By Henry Harmon Chamberlin, '95.

ONE of my critics has said he feared I had based my translation of Theocritus on other translations, rather than on the Greek. His fears are groundless. For I have stuck to the text throughout. Sometimes, on a second reading, I have used a trochee, usually the French of M. Philippe Legrand, to pick out a word or phrase I did not know. As soon as I felt that I had sensed the atmosphere of the Idyll, I would start to translate with Liddell and Scott at my elbow. It was then that I looked up every word that seemed to warrant a careful scrutiny, in order to understand both its special use and its inner meaning. Through all these manoeuvres, I never read through any translation by anybody.

When mine was done, I did try to read some other translations. They seemed to me extraordinarily mosche, to use a bit of French slang. What principally struck me in nearly all of them was the total lack of humor; and humor is one of the most salient features of Theocritus, at times a rollicking humor, at other times a humor that borders on pathos, or merges into high tragedy. There was none of this in the translations that I read. One of them was written for the most part in blank verse, somewhat as Tennyson might have written, if he had had paresis. Another was done in a pale, polished, preraphaelite prose that made all the Idylls look alike, whereas they are infinitely varied. I have never read any of these translations through, and I do not want to read them any more. I do not think I could stand it for any great length of time.

I do not say that my work is any better, though it naturally seems better to me. I did my translation in verse, because for me the spirit of Greek poetry, or of any other poetry, can never be even remotely translated in prose. For prose, by nature, dispels the illusion which creates and leaves little or none of the dissolution. Such is the imitation which Dryden had in mind, said that it resembled the one corpse resembles a living man, as I thoroughly agree with Dryden tried to revive at least some of the Greek in English verse.

Roughly speaking, the poetocritus comes under six heads: bucolic or pastoral poem, whether actual rustic or, in other poets and prominent people as such; second, the mime or uncolloquial, the epigraphy or eulogies; third, the epigrams of the "Hymn to the Dioscuri," the Horace or the encomia or eulogies; fifth, the songs addressed to some object or written for a special occasion; sixthly, the epics follow more or less closely Homer, though sometimes the language is used with mock heroic effect. Finally, the lyric is not a magnificent "Epithalamium," as would seem to imitate the maestoso and Alcestis and to be composed in Aeolic dialect. Such variations have tried, however feebly, to translate the various Idylls.

But variety of effect is by no means confined to these six divisions. Theocritus had the rare faculty of individualizing his characters and modes of expression are also differentiated. The words of all the characters of Molière's "Misanthrope"" appropriações to the father of "This precise and vivid dialogue is an example of the art of painting language. The two interlocutors have the same desire; they express..."
News and Views

The recent annual report of President Conant contains a quotation from that portion of Dean Hanford's report for 1936-37 which deals with "The Development of the Harvard National Scholarship Plan.

Under that title this has been reprinted as a separate pamphlet. For its fuller treatment of an important matter which President Conant could not, within the limits of his report treat in detail, it is a highly significant contribution to current educational history.

Harvard readers in particular may not all remember that the National Scholarship Plan has been in operation only since 1934, and may even possess but a vague knowledge of what it is. In brief its object is to bring from portions of the country that have been meagerly represented in undergraduate enrollment here a constant and larger flow of promising students, whether with or without the financial resources to support them at Harvard. To this end scholarships have been provided and careful methods of selection put into play. The scholarships are awarded primarily on the ground of capacity and character, but the stipends vary with the recipients' needs. Where financial help is required, it is supplied in amounts as required. These range from a prize of $100 to those whom it is desired only to honor, up to $1,200, with an additional $100 for those who come from remote places. These larger awards are designed to meet all necessary expenses and thus to relieve the student from devastating burdens of self-support. To the objection raised in certain quarters that Harvard is thus taking an unfair advantage over local institutions unable to offer such financial help, it is answered that many of the promising students brought to Harvard under this new plan could not possibly afford to enter the colleges nearer home.

What have been the results so far? In the first year, 1934-35, there were ten holders of National Scholarships from six Middle Western States. Two States were added, in each of the two following years, and, through gifts to the Tercentenary Fund, five new States, in the South, Southwest, and Far West were added for students entering College in the autumn of 1937. The number of students in Harvard College who entered with National Scholarships is now 67.

Much has been expected of these men, and the expectations have been met. A recital of their various activities, scholastic, social, athletic, would cover all the inter-