As 1984 Looms: From Loneliness to Hope in the Mass Society

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The spectre of 1984 is upon us. Notwithstanding the absence of any dramatic forms of "Big Brother" politics, there is uneasiness in the land.

A few years ago, a senior at Purdue University sat patiently and excitedly one spring day, awaiting his name to be read at his graduation, so he could walk forward, beam and be applauded by all, like every other member of his class.

But his name was never called. Later he learned that a computer error had wiped his name and record from the list of graduating seniors. At that moment, however, I imagine that he felt very much alone, to say the least, deflated, not having the slightest idea what had happened.

Like that student, many of us find ourselves living in a mass society. This is not the apocalyptic world of George Orwell's "1984," but it is perhaps all the more insidious and overwhelming, because it is so subtle.

During the 1960s, people heard from sociologists and other observers of our culture that ours is a nation of faceless, nameless individuals. In those years we heard much about huge, impersonal bureaucracies — government, business, labor, even religious institutions — which swallowed up the individual's worth and meaning.

Many people in those days felt like numbers, without any real importance and without any power. Along with this, many — especially the young — felt isolated and adrift. Lonely. One widely hailed book of that era was "The Lonely Crowd." Another was "The Pursuit of Loneliness."

What has happened in the mass society 20 years later?

If anything, in my judgment, things are worse today than they were perceived to be two decades ago. Then many believed that they could storm the barricades of "the establishment," sing protest songs, smoke dope and eat granola, and the mass society would begin to melt before their eyes.

Today, we're confronted with a much more sobering picture. Not only do we stand before the power of the huge institutions of our world, but we also see the profound powerlessness of individuals more radically than many observers did in the '60s.

The typical question of the 1980s is: What can anyone do? The governmental-industrial-academic complex, that high-tech world of health-care and defense industries, agri-business, transnational corporations and holding conglomerates, and the adjunct institutions of the unions and academia, seems to dwarf and dominate the low-tech needs of people around the world.

Manufacturing jobs continue to slip away. Connecticut and Hartford are typical. In 1947, manufacturing jobs represented 50 percent of the state's economy; today, they are less than 20 percent. In 1947, there were 38,000 manufacturing jobs in Hartford; today, there are 18,000. Those jobs have been transferred, without the people who held them, to places such as Hong Kong, South Korea, or to the Sun Belt.

Transnational corporations, which have been moving those jobs around the world like checkers on a checker board, seem to function above and beyond the employment needs of our citizens.

The situation of most Hartford residents is typical of the masses in many other cities of the world. They live in a Third World predicament of powerlessness, anonymity and impoverishment. Not only is Hartford the fourth poorest city in the nation, but the Greater Hartford area has the greatest disparity of wealth between its city and suburban populations than anywhere in the country.

Show me a Hartford resident who feels confident about the future, who feels that he or she has a secure job (if he or she has a job), and who has the sense that he or she is making a meaningful contribution to society, and I will show you an exception.

Show me people who constantly fear being fired or who have no hope for employment, who fear being displaced by conditions over which they have worked over by governmental and economic forces beyond their control, and I will show you the rule.

I suspect that the mass society also has a debilitating effect on the consciousness of many of our more affluent, suburban citizens.

I do not know how many of the people who sit hour after hour at the consoles of our high-tech corporations find their identities defined more by those machines, and by the impersonal way in which they fit into the bureaucracy, and less by family, neighborhood, religious community. But I would not be surprised if their number were legion.

I wonder how many managers and executives, through the middle levels at least, secretly think of themselves as numbers, as replaceable parts, with essentially no individual value to speak of or any unique contribution to make to that world. The reports of ulcers and alcoholism and broken marriages seem to suggest that many of those executives have internalized those kinds of assumptions.

Is there a way from loneliness to hope in this mass society?

We could consider creating or revitalizing a whole range of groups and social structures, which could conceivably bring isolated individuals together. These former "mediating institutions" might function as the old wards or ethnic clubs did, only they would have to occupy a much larger sociopolitical territory. And there would have to be a constant process of coalition-building.

Such groups might include block groups, tenants' associations, student organizations, parents' groups, personal support groups, citywide coalitions of neighborhood groups, rural and regional cooperatives, national citizens' groups such as a Common Cause or the nuclear freeze coalition, as well as international organizations such as the Club of Rome or Amnesty International.

One attractive option, given the structural character of unemployment in our country, is the industrial cooperative, which is based on the principle that every employee has an equal ownership share in the company, and that there are no other owners but the employees. Today, in the Basque provinces of Spain and France, there are 85 such industrial cooperatives employing 20,000 member-worker-owners.

These pioneering "mediating institutions" are predicated on Catholic social teaching, which accents the need for each person "to consider himself or herself a part-owner of the great workbench at which they are working with everyone else," as Pope John Paul II has written.

The revitalization of these institutions could be a sign of hope in the midst of the hopelessness of the mass society. To be sure, if the institutions were to make any difference, they would have to be predicated on universal values of justice, peace and freedom, as the Basque cooperatives appear to be. They could not be merely "single interest" groups with no practical concern for others.

In this process, as the mention of Catholic social philosophy and John Paul II already indicates, the society's religious communities could play a key role. They are, or aspire to be, value-forming and community-building agencies, which also place high value on individual worth. For this reason, they could function as initiators and supporters of effective mediating institutions oriented on the common good, as churches in the Basque region did with the cooperative movement, and as religious groups have done in helping to launch self-help, community-building organizations in this city and around the world.

In this very practical way, our religious communities could become what the biblical promise says they can and should become: a light to the nations, beacons of hope for the anonymous and despairing masses of this world. The ancient vision of the prophets, the dream of a day when the lamb would lie down with the lion, when swords would be beaten into plowshares, when the poor and the oppressed and the lonely everywhere would be set free and gathered into communities of justice — that could take on some new and desperately needed tangible expressions.

The question is, however, whether our religious communities have the will and vision — and perseverance — to lay full claim to that biblical promise. If they do, then the whole society may indeed be able to look forward to 1984, with hope.

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