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NEW OLD-MYTHS FOR OLD NEW-PROBLEMS:
ACADEMICS FOR THE NIXON AGE

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The Nixon administration has had enough time to reformulate the domestic problems of the country and set them in a new perspective. This problem reformulation will not necessarily result in problem amelioration or elimination however: for example, poor people are not well-off or about to disappear, independent of label or classification. If a "new reality" of the 70's has been painted, we may expect some flaking and blistering to appear.

Because there is an intimate interaction between the academic and governmental communities, a shift in the academic conceptualizations of the nation's social changes has come in along with the change in political cast in the last three years. Academic conceptions support and lend legitimacy to a new national "reality." We want to explore this reality here. (See also Berube, 1970)

This "new truth" can be expressed in terms of myths -- collective beliefs based on a set of wishes of a group. I want to identify these myths and explore their meaning and consequences. Note that myths are rarely verifiable -- they are neither true nor false. As organizing ideas and propositions they explain phenomena that are considered significant in a

society. What is important about a myth system is not necessarily the myths themselves, but the functions the myths serve. Myths elevate certain values in importance, and suggest kinds of action that are appropriate in dealing with the perceived problems of the society.

The current myths of the Nixon Administration include the following five:

Myth 1: Rising expectations are the source of social unrest. Things are much better than we are willing to admit. Therefore, we must keep expectations down.

This is one myth for which there exists some empirical evidence, at least for the promises. It is the conclusion that is dubious. The Kerner Commission Report investigated the socio-economic status of "rioters" in a number of cities and found that these people were neither poorest nor the richest in the area, but those likely to be doing better and rising faster than most others. (Caplan, 1968) It would seem that their expectations had risen faster than the realities.

When Patrick Moynihan talks of "benign neglect" and claims that "We may need a period in which Negro progress continues and racial rhetoric fades," he, too, is assuming that rising expectations are a source of our problems. (Moynihan, 1970) He is also suggesting that there has been a great deal more progress than we wish to

admit on this front.* Moynihan actually posited this myth somewhat earlier in his book Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding. (Moynihan, 1969) Opposite the title page is a quote from Aaron Wildavsky's article "The Empty-head Blues," where it is suggested that the then current violence is due to the fact that we have promised a lot and delivered little. (Wildavsky, 1968)

Edward Banfield, in a series of recent articles, has said much the same.

The answer is that the improvements in performance, great as they have been, have not kept pace with the rising expectations. In other words, although things have been getting better absolutely, they have been getting worse relative to what we think they should be. (Banfield, 1970 b)

Moynihan, Banfield, and others who view themselves as the "new realists," believe that change is best done in a period of calm, tranquility, and order. This contrasts strongly with the view that social change is most likely to be effected during periods of crisis. (Bennis, 1969 a) But for the "new realists," unrest, which would be consequent to rising expectations, is viewed as an unwelcome interruption to planned change.

The hidden costs of maintaining the rising expectations myth are substantial. Delay in entering into projects, a strategy which

* Things may be better in some areas as recent government reports suggest. However, there has been some doubt about the validity of his conclusions and a suggestion that his statistics are "well" chosen and not completely representative. This is reminiscent of criticism of the "Moynihan Report." (Rainwater, 1968)

this myth implies, can be extraordinarily costly. Also, if we do not believe that unrest, due to rising expectations, is a good indicator of where we need to invest national funds and resources now, then how do we decide? What should be our information? What will be the source for change? How can proponents of this myth cue themselves to the changes needed in the society, if their strategies, in effect, subvert the expression of popular demands?

Myth 2: We need to know much more. We cannot manipulate the social system and intervene in people's lives responsibly without knowing fully the consequences of our action. Research is valuable in informing that action.

Moynihan has been most forceful in advocating this point-of-view. His chief criticism of the OEO Community Action Programs is that "the government did not know what it was doing." (Moynihan, 1969) The professors, he argues, proposed anti-poverty policies, the consequences of which they did not know. Moreover, Moynihan suggests that these lacks of knowledge were the sources of the failure of the community action programs.* In his recent memo to President Nixon he states, "We really ought to be getting on with research on crime. We just don't know enough."

*Walinsky, 1969, disputes this point strongly.

Edward Banfield offers a similar position. (Banfield, 1970 b) The "do-gooders" are the source of many of our social problems, he says, since their ideas of what is good and what will work, have very little to do with what really is good and what does work.

I sense in both Moynihan's and Banfield's positions an acceptance of research as a surrogate for action. Even this corner is not a safe one to hide in, however. Sociologist, Irving Horowitz has emphasized how research activities are really "action," so it is not so clear that this know-more myth is even internally consistent. (Horowitz, 1967)

Those who accept the know-much more myth have perceptions of the social system similar to those who believe the rising expectations myth. They fear the uncontrolled society. For them, the lack of "perfect" information in doing social action is equivalent to acting in an uncontrolled system. They thus reject the possibility of acting in a cybernetic system in which social intervention actions produce continuous feedbacks which tell us much of what we need to know to act better. In concentrating on "knowing more," the believers in this second myth avoid the question, "Knowing more to do what?" They miss the opportunity to strategically combine knowing more, acting better, and value examination. They guarantee that social science will remain out of policy-making except as part of the mopping-up afterwards.

Research and the delays involved in doing research can be costly. More significantly, it is not at all obvious that more information is useful in acting better. It is true that certain

information can make a big difference, but the assertion that we need to know more does not point out the importance of choosing, in a strategic way, what we wish to know. Proponents of the know-more myth do not ask a crucial question: how can we structure research so that we learn at least a little bit more that will be useful in acting better, while not spending extensive resources on knowing an infinite amount that will do us very little good?

Myth 3: We must reject idealism. Effective action must be sensitive to the constraints of the political environment.

This myth has many forms and I want to discuss several of them.

The system is very complex, is likely to do unexpected things, and will react back on you to cause ultimate failure of most attempts at change.* Therefore, we need to identify our evils and deal directly with them. Indirection is not the way to approach systemic problems.

Banfield states that, "people often respond to government measures by making adaptations, the aggregate effect of which is to render the measures ineffective or even injurious." (Banfield, 1970 a) In this fashion, the desire of the middle classes to do good often results in doing harm to the lower class. To avoid backfires, Banfield proposes measures for dealing with the problems he sees. For example, "Make it clear in advance that those who incite to riot will be severely punished." (Banfield, 1970 a)

*Margolis, 1968, gives a deeper discussion of this problem from the economist's viewpoint (p. 546).

Another version of this myth admits that the system is complex but suggests that the only way to achieve success is by indirection. The obvious modes of intervention will not work. This point of view has been most graphically presented by J. Forrester. (Forrester, 1969) Whether or not Forrester's modeling is correct, what is important is that his ideas, that the system is complex and our intervention into it must be indirect, have been adopted by many. Although Forrester sees a different failure and proposes what sounds like a solution opposite to that of Banfield, Forrester's ideas of indirect action, or action that is not "doing-good," turns out to be very similar to Banfield's ideas of dealing directly with the problem.

A third version of this myth is that even if we do react in a hard nosed direct fashion, what is feasible will not turn out to be politically acceptable. We will just have to make do with the best we can hope for. Again these ideas have been most recently voiced by Banfield. Each one of his perfectly "obvious" ideas are either infeasible, or, if they are feasible, they are not politically acceptable in a "do-good climate." (Banfield, 1970 a)

In accord with the realist myth, it is often stated that even if we spend money on poverty, it just won't go away. We just don't know the right thing to do. Banfield states, "One problem is to keep the impulse for doing good from gushing incontinently into mass extravaganzas--domestic Marshall Plans, Freedom Budgets, and the like--into which billions are poured for no one knows what or how...." (Banfield, 1970 a) Moynihan has argued similarly. (Moynihan, 1969)

A variation of this myth suggests that we should not force people to spend money to help others if they do not receive any benefits from this spending themselves. Melvin Webber has pointed up the problem of these "third parties" and sees no reason why the society should force its standards on someone who does not benefit at all from them. (Webber, 1969)

In all of its various versions, the realist myth represents a failure of nerve. It is true that systems are complex and that interventions have sometimes quite unpredictable consequences. But the reply that we must intervene gingerly is a rejection of all that is possible. It is reminiscent of Myth 1, which says that whatever successes have been made up until now must be viewed as only relative. The frustration of the blacks, due to their relativistic evaluation of their progress, is considered bad by the Administration, but the frustration of the academics, considering the relative progress of their efforts, is considered normal and acceptable. The high frustration and ambiguity of the system is, apparently, hard for the academics to take and its complexity signals that we (the government) must retreat until they (academics) understand.

A serious problem that is contingent upon accepting this myth is that accepting it implies that we ought to abandon risky policies and avoid our impulses to "do good." But what, then, would be anyone's motivation to effect social improvement?

Myth 4: Government is sick. It has to worry about too many little things.
And, thereby, it avoids dealing with the consequences of its programs.
It must respond to this sickness by becoming more efficient in meeting
the demands likely to be placed on it.

Peter Drucker has been most articulate in arguing this view. (Drucker, 1967, 1969) He suggests that because government has to deal with a multitude of the "diddly" everyday problems of running itself and administering the details of many programs, it does not have the time to look at the consequences of its action. Government has lots of power and no control. At the same time, Drucker notes that private industry is quite capable of fulfilling tasks assigned to it by the Federal Government. He points to the space program as an example. Private industry is extolled for its ability to go out of business when it becomes incapable of fulfilling the demands placed on it, as well as its ability to "satisfice" rather than maximize. Using his prescription for how an executive ought to act, he proposes that the government set output standards, decide what it wants and how much it should cost, and then contract out with private industry to fulfill these objectives. "Reprivatization" by government-by-contract is the prescription for our ills.

Drucker is responding to a feeling among many that the "true" functions of the government bureaucracy have been lost. The Post Office "obviously" should concentrate on delivering the mail, he would say, and not on providing a means of economic mobility for its workers. A similar case is made for poverty programs. In Drucker's

view they do not seem to have made many people better off in the sense of increasing their income. He discounts the potential value of "rip offs" and power structures that may develop in the ghetto due to the poverty programs. For Drucker, a guaranteed income is preferable in that it would be a direct way of dealing with poverty, yet it does not have these "undesirable" consequences.

By using "government-by-contract" and avoiding the current bureaucratic system, advocates of reprivatization hope that a new form of stability can be built into federal activities. At the same time government would, supposedly, become more "efficient." The outputs of programs would be better related to the manifestly intended effects. However, since the intended effect of many programs is not the manifest one, this kind of efficiency may not be so desirable. But if efficiency, per se, is psychically needed, this myth provides a road to it.

Another presumed benefit of this myth's realization would be that private industry, with its present structure, could enter into the social services business. Currently the risks are very high in such endeavors and many firms get heavily "burned." But by restructuring the social service system, so as to increase predictability, private industry would willingly take these contracts. A social-industrial-academic complex would presumably emerge from these developments.

There are some problems with the sickness myth. If we are to avoid politics, pay-offs, the inefficient, and the unpredictable, then what will we have to bargain and compromise with? Explicit statements of the consequences of our policies may result in greater social

conflict and less consensus than we have even now. The market that is likely to be set up by reprivatizing may be even less responsive than the current highly politicized system of social services delivery. Consequently, flexibility in the use of public funds in national emergencies would be lost--a private postal corporation can be expected to be no more willing to help out in times of high unemployment than defense contractors are now. Finally, I believe that power lies both in large allocative decisions and in the details of such decisions. It is not clear that we want to delegate the latter's powers, wholesale, to the private sector.

Myth 5: We must go back to a version of consumer choice of governmental services if we want to do any good. There is no way of knowing ahead what is good for someone else. We will have to let people go out and choose for themselves.

The market has been rediscovered by many academics as a new source of virtue in the social system. Charles Lindblom has pointed out how the market mechanism is becoming more important both in the East and in the West. (Lindblom, 1966) Melvin Webber has put it well.

I am suggesting that we attach prices to many governmental services that are now distributed without charge. The aim is not, of course, to return to the laissez-faire traditions of the past. Rather, it is to build into our decision-and-action processes those feedback loops which are essential to accomplishing the welfare objects we seek. (Webber, 1969)

Moynihan, in discussing the war on poverty, asserted that what the intellectuals wanted for the poor is not what the poor wanted for themselves. By ignoring the consumers of governmental services, poor people, the poverty program was bound to fail. (Moynihan, 1969)

A slightly different version of these ideas is Banfield's proposal that we need to develop more direct ways of dealing with the market. Rather than tell people what they must have or what is good for them, he suggests that the nation ought to give poor people a fixed minimum income guarantee and then use incentive programs to encourage "good" types of behavior. (See also, Moynihan, 1969 b) If they wish to, they will still have the "freedom" to act differently.

The new belief in "consumer sovereignty" has its source in several realities. Many of the intellectuals and do-gooders are sick and tired of being called "honkey." Also, they doubt that adequate measures of the outputs of public policies exist; going back to the market provides one measure of success--sales. In this way, the academics avoid the charge of elitism. Finally, if the incomes of poor people are not likely to be increased, choice becomes a surrogate for goods.

The undesirable consequences of adopting this myth are substantial. We have no guarantees that this new market would be better with respect to the effects of externalities, monopoly, dishonesty, and advertising than other private markets. Other ways of learning about consumer desires exist and have yet to be exploited for full effectiveness (survey research and consumer organizations). Finally, there is

the question of power. All of the above "evils" weaken the individual consumer in the marketplace. But it is doubtful that the proposed market in public services would encourage consumer organizations. Rather, we might expect consumers to be more at a loss in confronting private powers than they are in confronting the government.

The essentially conservative character of the myths I have described stands in contrast with the liberal style of the academic community. I can only suggest some reasons why this might be so. There is no reason to believe that "disinterested" inquiry, pursued in the disciplinary model (whether sociology, political science, psychology....), should lead to data and conclusions that would be helpful in ameliorating social injustice. More likely, the experimental style of most social research, emphasizing the examination of a small system in the context of a larger one, would lead to recommendations that would take the larger systems as a given. The distance between social science research and policy is substantial, and the personal biases of the social researcher may be more significant in forming his policy than the social research he does. Also, most of the research is not being done by the disadvantaged (whether poor, black, old, infants, or women). Thus their special interests and concerns will not be represented by members of their groups in the social science business.

Conclusion:

I have described five new myths now current in governmental circles. They are: rising expectations as a source of unrest, a need to know more and do more research before acting, a rejection of

idealism, a sense that traditional government administration is failing, and a new faith in the market as a way of making choices.

None of these myths, alone, is to be rejected or accepted. It is their totality as a complex that paints a wash over the social scene. And the color of that wash is one response to more fundamental realities of today. These realities include greater ambiguity and uncertainty, a sense that the government is losing control over its actions and their consequences, and a sense that the costs of equity in America will be quite high.

Other responses to these realities are possible however. (1) Rising expectations can be viewed as desirable and as a guide for where the next bit of social change might take place. Social unrest need not be viewed as pathological, but as intrinsic to the informational and psychological functioning of our society. (2) If we are ignorant, we still can act. We just have to admit we know little, respond willingly to changes in what we know, and realize that those who know are not necessarily those who have academic degrees. (3) Our political environment can be a function of what we want to do. An open view of our possibilities is likely to result in greater achievements and greater frustration. (4) We cannot expect that single dimensioned evaluations of governmental activities, activities which are naturally multi-dimensional, will lead us to value them properly. The post office, for example, provides service other than handling the mail; and most recently, we note, that the armed forces serve other functions than defending the country. (5) And finally, we must

try to insure that we have sensitive governmental decision makers in appointive as well as elective posts; all of us will need a strong sense of ourselves and an open approach to those with whom we deal. If there is some better parity in our relationships, both public and private, than choosing for others will have its reciprocal aspects keeping up all aware of each other.

I would expect that this set of myths, counter to the Nixonian myths, would be just as consistent with the ambiguity and change that we sense around us, and more significantly, this set should be liberating and positive, rather than constraining and negative.

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