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On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor

Peter Berger

Honor occupies about the same place in contemporary usage as chastity. An individual asserting it hardly invites admiration, and one who claims to have lost it is an object of amusement rather than sympathy. Both concepts have an unambiguously outdated status in the *Weltanschauung* of modernity. Especially intellectuals, by definition in the vanguard of modernity, are about as likely to admit to honor as to be found out as chaste. At best, honor and chastity are seen as ideological leftovers in the consciousness of obsolete classes, such as military officers or ethnic grandmothers.

The obsolescence of the concept of honor is revealed very sharply in the inability of most contemporaries to understand insult, which in essence is an assault on honor. In this, at least in America, there is a close parallel between modern consciousness and modern law. Motives of honor have no standing in American law, and legal codes that still admit them, as in some countries of southern Europe, are perceived as archaic. In modern consciousness, as in American law (shaped more than any other by that prime force of modernization which is capitalism), insult in itself is not actionable, is not recognized as a real injury. The insulted party must be able to prove material damage. There are cases, indeed, where psychic harm may be the basis for a legal claim, but that too is a far cry from a notion of offense against honor. The *Weltanschauung* of everyday life closely conforms in this to the legal definitions of reality. If an individual is insulted and, as a result, is harmed in his career or his capacity to earn an income, he may not only have recourse to the

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courts but may count on the sympathy of his friends. His friends, and in some cases the courts, will come to his support if, say, the insult so unsettles him that he loses his self-esteem or has a nervous breakdown. If, however, neither kind of injury pertains, he will almost certainly be advised by lawyers and friends alike to just forget the whole thing. In other words, the *reality* of the offense will be denied. If the individual persists in maintaining it, he will be negatively categorized, most probably in psychiatric terms (as “neurotic,” “overly sensitive,” or the like), or if applicable in terms that refer to cultural lag (as “hopelessly European,” perhaps, or as the victim of a “provincial mentality”).

The contemporary denial of the reality of honor and of offenses against honor is so much part of a taken-for-granted world that a deliberate effort is required to even see it as a problem. The effort is worthwhile, for it can result in some, perhaps unexpected, new insights into the structure of modern consciousness.

The problem of the obsolescence of the concept of honor can be brought into better focus by comparing it with a most timely concept—that of dignity. Taken by itself, the demise of honor might be interpreted as part of a process of moral coarsening, of a lessening of respect for persons, even of dehumanization. Indeed, this is exactly how it looked to a conservative mind at the beginning of the modern era—for example, to the fifteenth-century French poet Eustache Deschamps: “Age of decline nigh to the end,/Time of horror which does all things falsely,/Lying age, full of pride and of envy,/Time without honour and without true judgment.”¹ Yet it seems quite clear in retrospect that this pessimistic estimate was, to say the least, very one-sided. The age that saw the decline of honor also saw the rise of new moralities and of a new humanism, and most specifically of a historically unprecedented concern for the dignity and the rights of the individual. The same modern men who fail to understand an issue of honor are immediately disposed to concede the demands for dignity and for equal rights by almost every new group that makes them—racial or religious minorities, exploited classes, the poor, the deviant, and so on. Nor would it be just to question the genuineness of this disposition. A little thought, then, should make clear that the problem is not clarified by ethical pessimism. It is necessary to ask more fundamentally: What is honor? What is dignity? What can be learned about modern consciousness by the obsolescence of the one and the unique sway of the other?

Honor is commonly understood as an aristocratic concept, or at least associated with a hierarchical order of society. It is certainly true that Western notions of honor have been strongly influenced by the medieval codes of chivalry and that these were rooted in the social structures of feudalism. It is also true that concepts of honor have survived into the modern era best in groups retaining a hierarchical view of society, such as the nobility, the military, and traditional professions like law and medicine. In such groups honor is a direct expression of status, a source of solidarity among social equals and a demarcation line against social inferiors. Honor, indeed, also dictates certain standards of behavior in dealing with inferiors, but the full code of honor only applies among those who share the same status in the hierarchy. In a hierarchically ordered society the etiquette of everyday life consists of ongoing transactions of honor, and different groups relate differently to this process according to the principle of "To each his due." It would be a mistake, however, to understand honor *only* in terms of hierarchy and its delineations. To take the most obvious example, the honor of women in many traditional societies, while usually differentiated along class lines, may pertain in principle to women of *all* classes.

J. K. Campbell, in his study of contemporary rural culture in Greece,² makes this very clear. While the obligations of honor (*timi*) differ as between different categories of individuals, notably between men and women, everyone within the community exists within the same all-embracing system of honor. Those who have high status in the community have particular obligations of honor, but even the lowly are differentiated in terms of honor and dishonor. Men should exhibit manliness and women shame, but the failure of either implies dishonor for the individual, the family and, in some cases, the entire community. For all, the qualities enjoined by honor provide the link, not only between self and community, but between self and the idealized norms of the community: "Honour considered as the possession by men and women of these qualities is the attempt to relate existence to certain archetypal patterns of behaviour."³ Conversely, dishonor is a fall from grace in the most comprehensive sense—loss of face in the community, but also loss of self and separation from the basic norms that govern human life.

It is valid to view such a culture as essentially premodern, just as it is plausible to predict its disintegration under the impact of modernization. Historically, there are several stages in the latter process. The decline of medieval codes of honor did not lead directly to the contemporary situation in which honor is an all but meaningless concept. There took place first the *embourgeoisement* of

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honor, which has been defined by Norbert Elias as the process of "civilization," both a broadening and a mellowing process.⁴ The contents had changed, but there was still a conception of honor in the age of the triumphant bourgeoisie. Yet it was with the rise of the bourgeoisie, particularly in the consciousness of its critical intellectuals, that not only the honor of the *ancien régime* and its hierarchical prototypes was debunked, but that an understanding of man and society emerged that would eventually liquidate *any* conception of honor.

Thus Cervantes' *Quixote* is the tragi-comedy of a particular obsolescence, that of the knight-errant in an age in which chivalry has become an empty rhetoric. The greatness of the *Quixote*, however, transcends this particular time-bound debunking job. It unmasks not only the "madness" of chivalry but, by extension, the folly of *any* identification of self with "archetypal patterns of behaviour." Put differently, Don Quixote's "enchanters" (whose task, paradoxically, is precisely what Max Weber had in mind as "*disenchantment*") cannot be stopped so easily once they have started their terrible task. As Don Quixote tells Sancho in one of his innumerable homilies: "Is it possible that in the time you have been with me you have not yet found out that all the adventures of a knight-errant appear to be illusion, follies, and dreams, and turn out to be the reverse? Not because things are really so, but because in our midst there is a host of enchanters, forever changing, disguising and transforming our affairs as they please, according to whether they wish to favor or destroy us. So, what you call a barber's basin is to me Mambrino's helmet, and to another person it will appear to be something else."⁵ These "enchanters," alas, have not stopped with chivalry. Every human adventure, in which the self and its actions have been identified and endowed with the honor of collective prototypes has, finally, been debunked as "illusion, follies, and dreams." Modern man is Don Quixote on his deathbed, denuded of the multicolored banners that previously enveloped the self and revealed to be *nothing but a man*: "I was mad, but I am now in my senses; I was once Don Quixote of La Mancha, but I am now, as I said before, Alonso Quixano the Good."⁶ The same self, deprived or, if one prefers, freed from the mystifications of honor is hailed in Falstaff's "catechism": "Honour is a mere scutcheon."⁷ It is modern consciousness that unmasks it as such, that "enchants" or "disenchants" it (depending on one's point of view) until it is shown as nothing but a painted artifact. Behind the "mere scutcheon" is the face of modern man—man bereft of the consolation of prototypes, *man alone*.

It is important to understand that it is precisely this solitary self that modern consciousness has perceived as the bearer of human dignity and of inalienable human rights. The modern discovery of dignity took place precisely amid the wreckage of debunked conceptions of honor. Now, it would be a mistake to ascribe to modern consciousness alone the discovery of a fundamental dignity underlying all possible social disguises. The same discovery can be found in the Hebrew Bible, as in the confrontation between Nathan and David ("Thou art the man"); in Sophocles, in the confrontation between Antigone and Creon; and, in a different form, in Mencius' parable of a criminal stopping a child from falling into a well. The understanding that there is a humanity behind or beneath the roles and the norms imposed by society, and that this humanity has profound dignity, is not a modern prerogative. What is peculiarly modern is the manner in which the reality of this intrinsic humanity is related to the realities of society.

Dignity, as against honor, always relates to the intrinsic humanity divested of all socially imposed roles or norms. It pertains to the self as such, to the individual regardless of his position in society. This becomes very clear in the classic formulations of human rights, from the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. These rights always pertain to the individual "irrespective of race, color or creed"—or, indeed, of sex, age, physical condition or any conceivable social status. There is an implicit sociology and an implicit anthropology here. The implicit sociology views all biological and historical differentiations among men as either downright unreal or essentially irrelevant. The implicit anthropology locates the real self over and beyond all these differentiations.

It should now be possible to see these two concepts somewhat more clearly. Both honor and dignity are concepts that bridge self and society. While either pertains to the individual in a very intimate way, it is in relations with others that both honor and dignity are attained, exchanged, preserved or threatened. Both require a deliberate effort of the will for their maintenance—one must *strive* for them, often against the malevolent opposition of others—thus honor and dignity become goals of moral enterprise. Their loss, always a possibility, has far-reaching consequences for the self. Finally, both honor and dignity have an infectious quality that extends beyond the moral person of the individual possessing them.

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The infection involves his body ("a dignified gait"), his material ambience (from clothing to the furnishings of his house) and other individuals closely associated with him ("He brought honor on his whole family"). What, then, is the difference between these two concepts of the social self? Or, substituting a more current term to avoid the metaphysical associations of "self," how do these two conceptions of identity differ?

The concept of honor implies that identity is essentially, or at least importantly, linked to institutional roles. The modern concept of dignity, by contrast, implies that identity is essentially independent of institutional roles. To return to Falstaff's image, in a world of honor the individual is the social symbols emblazoned on his escutcheon. The true self of the knight is revealed as he rides out to do battle in the full regalia of his role; by comparison, the naked man in bed with a woman represents a lesser reality of the self. In a world of dignity, in the modern sense, the social symbolism governing the interaction of men is a disguise. The escutcheons *hide* the true self. It is precisely the naked man, and even more specifically the naked man expressing his sexuality, who represents himself more truthfully. Consequently, the understanding of self-discovery and self-mystification is reversed as between these two worlds. In a world of honor, the individual discovers his true identity in his roles, and to turn away from the roles is to turn away from himself—in "false consciousness," one is tempted to add. In a world of dignity, the individual can only discover his true identity by emancipating himself from his socially imposed roles—the latter are only masks, entangling him in illusion, "alienation" and "bad faith." It follows that the two worlds have a different relation to history. It is through the performance of institutional roles that the individual participates in history, not only the history of the particular institution but that of his society as a whole. It is precisely for this reason that modern consciousness, in its conception of the self, tends toward a curious ahistoricity. In a world of honor, identity is firmly linked to the past through the reiterated performance of prototypical acts. In a world of dignity, history is the succession of mystifications from which the individual must free himself to attain "authenticity."

It is important not to lose sight here of continuities in the constitution of man—of "anthropological constants," if one prefers. Modern man is not a total innovation or a mutation of the species. Thus he shares with any version of archaic man known to us both his intrinsic sociality and the reciprocal process with society

through which his various identities are formed, maintained and changed. All the same, within the parameters set by his fundamental constitution, man has considerable leeway in constructing, dismantling and reassembling the worlds in which he lives. Inasmuch as identity is always part of a comprehensive world, and a humanly *constructed* world at that, there are far-reaching differences in the ways in which identity is conceived and, consequently, experienced. Definitions of identity vary with overall definitions of reality. Each such definition, however, has reality-generating power: Men not only define themselves, but they actualize these definitions in real experience—*they live them*.

No monocausal theory is likely to do justice to the transformation that has taken place. Very probably most of the factors commonly cited have in fact played a part in the process—technology and industrialization, bureaucracy, urbanization and population growth, the vast increase in communication between every conceivable human group, social mobility, the pluralization of social worlds and the profound metamorphosis in the social contexts in which children are reared. Be this as it may, the resultant situation has been aptly characterized by Arnold Gehlen with the terms “de-institutionalization” and “subjectivization.” The former term refers to a global weakening in the holding power of institutions over the individual. The institutional fabric, whose basic function has always been to provide meaning and stability for the individual, has become incohesive, fragmented and thus progressively deprived of plausibility. The institutions then confront the individual as fluid and unreliable, in the extreme case as unreal. Inevitably, the individual is thrown back upon himself, on his own subjectivity, from which he must dredge up the meaning and the stability that he requires to exist. Precisely because of man’s intrinsic sociality, this is a very unsatisfactory condition. Stable identities (and this also means identities that will be subjectively plausible) can only emerge in reciprocity with stable social contexts (and this means contexts that are structured by stable institutions). Therefore, there is a deep uncertainty about contemporary identity. Put differently, there is a built-in identity crisis in the contemporary situation.

It is in this connection that one begins to understand the implicit sociology and the implicit anthropology mentioned above. Both are rooted in actual experience of the modern world. The literary, philosophical and even social-scientific formulations are *ex post facto* attempts to come to terms with this experience. Gehlen has shown this convincingly for the rise of the modern novel as the

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literary form most fully reflecting the new subjectivism. But the conceptualizations of man and society of, for instance, Marxism and existentialism are equally rooted in this experience. So is the perspective of modern social science, especially of sociology. Marx's "alienation" and "false consciousness," Heidegger's "authenticity" and Sartre's "bad faith," and such current sociological notions as David Reisman's "other-direction" or Erving Goffman's "impression management" could only arise and claim credibility in a situation in which the identity-defining power of institutions has been greatly weakened.

The obsolescence of the concept of honor may now be seen in a much more comprehensive perspective. The social location of honor lies in a world of relatively intact, stable institutions, a world in which individuals can with subjective certainty attach their identities to the institutional roles that society assigns to them. The disintegration of this world as a result of the forces of modernity has not only made honor an increasingly meaningless notion, but has served as the occasion for a redefinition of identity and its intrinsic dignity apart from and often *against* the institutional roles through which the individual expresses himself in society. The reciprocity between individual and society, between subjective identity and objective identification through roles, now comes to be experienced as a sort of struggle. Institutions cease to be the "home" of the self; instead they become oppressive realities that distort and estrange the self. Roles no longer actualize the self, but serve as a "veil of *maya*" hiding the self not only from others but from the individual's own consciousness. Only in the interstitial areas left vacant, as it were, by the institutions (such as the so-called private sphere of social life) can the individual hope to discover or define himself. Identity ceases to be an objectively and subjectively given fact, and instead becomes the goal of an often devious and difficult quest. Modern man, almost inevitably it seems, is ever in search of himself. If this is understood, it will also be clear why both the sense of "alienation" and the concomitant identity crisis are most vehement among the young today. Indeed, "youth" itself, which is a matter of social definition rather than biological fact, will be seen as an interstitial area vacated or "left over" by the large institutional structures of modern society. For this reason it is, simultaneously, the locale of the most acute experiences of self-estrangement and of the most intensive quest for reliable identities.

A lot will depend, naturally, on one's basic assumptions about man whether one will bemoan or welcome these transformations.

What to one will appear as a profound loss will be seen by another as the prelude to liberation. Among intellectuals today, of course, it is the latter viewpoint that prevails and that forms the implicit anthropological foundation for the generally "left" mood of the time. The threat of chaos, both social and psychic, which ever lurks behind the disintegration of institutions, will then be seen as a necessary stage that must precede the great "leap into freedom" that is to come. It is also possible, in a conservative perspective, to view the same process as precisely the root pathology of the modern era, as a disastrous loss of the very structures that enable men to be free and to be themselves. Such pessimism is expressed forcefully, if somewhat petulantly, in Gehlen's latest book, a conservative manifesto in which modernity appears as an all-engulfing pestilence.⁸

We would contend here that both perspectives—the liberation myth of the "left" and the nostalgia of the "right" for an intact world—fail to do justice to the anthropological and indeed the ethical dimensions of the problem. It seems clear to us that the unrestrained enthusiasm for total liberation of the self from the "repression" of institutions fails to take account of certain fundamental requirements of man, notably those of *order*—that institutional order of society without which both collectivities and individuals must descend into dehumanizing chaos. In other words, the demise of honor has been a very costly price to pay for whatever liberations modern man may have achieved. On the other hand, the unqualified denunciation of the contemporary constellation of institutions and identities fails to perceive the vast moral achievements made possible by just this constellation—the discovery of the autonomous individual, with a dignity deriving from his very being, over and above all and any social identifications. Anyone denouncing the modern world *tout court* should pause and question whether he wishes to include in that denunciation the specifically modern discoveries of human dignity and human rights. The conviction that even the weakest members of society have an inherent right to protection and dignity; the proscription of slavery in all its forms, of racial and ethnic oppression; the staggering discovery of the dignity and rights of the child; the new sensitivity to cruelty, from the abhorrence of torture to the codification of the crime of genocide—a sensitivity that has become politically significant in the outrage against the cruelties of the war in Vietnam; the new recognition of individual responsibility for all actions, even those assigned to the individual with specific institutional roles, a recognition that attained the force of law at

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Nuremberg—all these, and others, are moral achievements that would be unthinkable without the peculiar constellations of the modern world. To reject them is unthinkable ethically. By the same token, it is not possible to simply trace them to a false anthropology.

The task before us, rather, is to understand the empirical processes that have made modern man lose sight of honor at the expense of dignity—and then to think through both the anthropological and the ethical implications of this. Obviously these remarks can do no more than point up some dimensions of the problem. It may be allowed, though, to speculate that a rediscovery of honor in the future development of modern society is both empirically plausible and morally desirable. Needless to say, this will hardly take the form of a regressive restoration of traditional codes. But the contemporary mood of anti-institutionalism is unlikely to last, as Anton Zijderveld implies.⁹ Man's fundamental constitution is such that, just about inevitably, he will once more construct institutions to provide an ordered reality for himself. A return to institutions will ipso facto be a return to honor. It will then be possible again for individuals to identify themselves with the escutcheons of their institutional roles, experienced now not as self-estranging tyrannies but as freely chosen vehicles of self-realization. The ethical question, of course, is what these institutions will be like. Specifically, the ethical test of any future institutions, and of the codes of honor they will entail, will be whether they succeed in embodying and in stabilizing the discoveries of human dignity that are the principal achievements of modern man.

NOTES

1. Cited in J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (New York: Doubleday-Anchor, 1954), p. 33 [my italics].
2. J. K. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage* (Oxford, 1964).
3. Ibid., pp. 271 sq.
4. Norbert Elias, *Der Prozess der Zivilisation* (Bern: Francke, 1969).
5. Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Walter Starkie (New York: New American Library, 1964), I:25, p. 243.
6. Ibid., II:74.
7. W. Shakespeare, *Henry IV*, Part I, V:I.
8. Arnold Gehlen, *Moral and Hypermoral* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1969).
9. Anton Zijderveld, *Abstract Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1970).