

THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMON REVISITED

by Beryl Crowe (1969)

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by **Garrett Hardin and John Baden**

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"There has developed in the contemporary natural sciences a recognition that there is a subset of problems, such as population, atomic war, and environmental corruption, for which there are no technical solutions.

"There is also an increasing recognition among contemporary social scientists that there is a subset of problems, such as population, atomic war, environmental corruption, and the recovery of a livable urban environment, for which there are no current political solutions. The thesis of this article is that the common area shared by these two subsets contains most of the critical problems that threaten the very existence of contemporary man." [p. 53]

ASSUMPTIONS NECESSARY TO AVOID THE TRAGEDY

"In passing the technically insoluble problems over to the political and social realm for solution, Hardin made three critical assumptions:

- (1) that there exists, or can be developed, a 'criterion of judgment and system of weighting . . .' that will 'render the incommensurables . . . commensurable . . .' in real life;
- (2) that, possessing this criterion of judgment, 'coercion can be mutually agreed upon,' and that the application of coercion to effect a solution to problems will be effective in modern society; and
- (3) that the administrative system, supported by the criterion of judgment and access to coercion, can and will protect the commons from further desecration." [p. 55]

ERODING MYTH OF THE COMMON VALUE SYSTEM

"In America there existed, until very recently, a set of conditions which perhaps made the solution to Hardin's subset possible; we lived with the myth that we were 'one people, indivisible. . . .' This myth postulated that we were the great 'melting pot' of the world wherein the diverse cultural ores of Europe were poured into the crucible of the frontier experience to produce a new alloy -- an American civilization. This new civilization was presumably united by a common value system that was democratic, equalitarian, and existing under universally enforceable rules contained in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

"In the United States today, however, there is emerging a new set of behavior patterns which suggest that the myth is either dead or dying. Instead of believing and behaving in accordance with the myth, large sectors of the population are developing life-styles and value hierarchies that give contemporary Americans an appearance more closely analogous to the particularistic, primitive forms of 'tribal' organizations in geographic proximity than to that shining new alloy, the American civilization." [p. 56]

"Looking at a more recent analysis of the sickness of the core city, Wallace F. Smith has argued that the productive model of the city is no longer viable for the purposes of economic analysis. Instead, he develops a model of the city as a site for leisure consumption, and then seems to suggest that the nature of this model is such is such that the city cannot regain its health because the leisure demands are value-based and, hence do not admit to compromise and accommodation; consequently there is no way of deciding among these value- oriented demands that are being made on the core city.

"In looking for the cause of the erosion of the myth of a common value system, it seems to me that so long as our perceptions and knowledge of other groups were formed largely through the written media of communication, the American myth that we were a giant melting pot of equalitarians could be sustained. In such a perceptual field it is tenable, if not obvious, that men are motivated by interests. Interests can always be compromised and accommodated without undermining our very being by sacrificing values. Under the impact of electronic media, however, this psychological distance has broken down and now we discover that these people with whom we could formerly compromise on interests are not, after all, really motivated by interests but by values. Their behavior in our very living room betrays a set of values, moreover, that are incompatible with our own, and consequently the compromises that we make are not those of contract but of culture. While the former are acceptable, any form of compromise on the latter is not a form of rational behavior but is rather a clear case of either apostasy or heresy. Thus we have arrived not at an age of accommodation but one of confrontation. In such an age 'incommensurables' remain 'incommensurable' in real life." [p. 59]

EROSION OF THE MYTH OF THE MONOPOLY OF COERCIVE FORCE

"In the past, those who no longer subscribed to the values of the dominant culture were held in check by the myth that the state possessed a monopoly on coercive force. This myth has undergone continual erosion since the end of World War II owing to the success of the strategy of guerrilla warfare, as first revealed to the French in Indochina, and later conclusively demonstrated in Algeria. Suffering as we do from what Senator Fulbright has called 'the arrogance of power,' we have been extremely slow to learn the lesson in Vietnam, although we now realize that war is political and cannot be won by military means. It is apparent that the myth of the monopoly of coercive force as it was first qualified in the civil rights conflict in the South, then in our urban ghettos, next on the streets of Chicago, and now on our college campuses has lost its hold over the minds of Americans. The technology of guerrilla warfare has made it evident that, while the state can win battles, it cannot win wars of values. Coercive force which is centered in the modern state cannot be sustained in the face of the active resistance of some 10 percent of the population unless the state is willing to embark on a deliberate policy of genocide directed against the value dissident groups. The factor that sustained the myth of coercive force in the past was the acceptance of a common value system. Whether the latter exists is questionable in the modern nation-state." [p.p. 59-60]

EROSION OF THE MYTH OF ADMINISTRATORS OF THE COMMONS

"Indeed, the process has been so widely commented upon that one writer postulated a common life cycle for all of the attempts to develop regulatory policies. The life cycle is launched by an outcry so widespread and demanding that it generates enough political force to bring about establishment of a regulatory agency to insure the equitable, just, and rational distribution of the advantages among all holders of interest in the commons. This phase is followed by the symbolic reassurance of the offended as the agency goes into operation, developing a period of political quiescence among the great majority of those who hold a general but unorganized interest in the commons. Once this political quiescence has developed, the highly organized and specifically interested groups who wish to make incursions into the commons bring sufficient pressure to bear through other political processes to convert the agency to the protection and furthering of their interests. In the last phase even staffing of the regulating agency is accomplished by drawing the agency administrators from the ranks of the regulated." [p.p. 60-61]