

# From Versailles To Cybernetics

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I have to talk about recent history as it appears to me in my generation and to you in yours and, as I flew in this morning, words began to echo in my mind. These were phrases more thunderous than any I might be able to compose.

One of these groups of words was, *The fathers have eaten bitter fruit and the children's teeth are set on edge.*

Another was the statement of Joyce that *History is that nightmare from which there is no awakening.*

Another was, *The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children even to the third and fourth generation of those that hate me.*

And lastly, not so immediately relevant, but still I think relevant to the problem of social mechanism, *He who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars. General Good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite, and flatterer.*

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We are talking about serious things. I call this lecture *From Versailles to Cybernetics* --- naming the two historic events of the twentieth century. The word "cybernetics" is familiar, is it not? But how many of you know what happened at Versailles in 1919?

The question is, *What* is going to count as important in the history of the last sixty years? I am sixty-two, and, as I began to think about what I have seen of history in my lifetime, it seemed to me that I had really only seen two moments that would rate as really important from an anthropologist's point of view. One was the events leading up to the Treaty of Versailles, and the other was the cybernetic breakthrough.

You may be surprised or shocked that I have not mentioned the A-bomb, or even World War II. I have not mentioned the spread of the automobile, nor of the radio and TV, nor many other things that have occurred in the last sixty years.

Let me state my criterion of historical importance:

Mammals in general, and we among them, care extremely, not about episodes, but about the patterns of their relationships.

When you open the refrigerator door and the cat comes up and makes certain sounds, she is not talking about liver or milk, though you may know very well that that is what she wants. You may be able to guess correctly and give her that --- if there is any in the refrigerator. What she actually says is something about the relationship between herself and you. If you translated her message into words, it would be something like,

*dependency, dependency, dependency.* She is talking, in fact, about a rather abstract pattern within a relationship. From that assertion of a pattern, you are expected to go from the general to the specific --- to deduce *milk* or *liver*.

This is crucial. This is what mammals are about. They are concerned with patterns of relationship, with where they stand in love, hate, respect, dependency, trust, and similar abstractions, vis-à-vis somebody else. This is where it hurts us to be put in the wrong. If we trust and find that that which we have trusted was untrustworthy; or if we distrust, and find that that which we distrusted was in fact trustworthy, we feel *bad*. The pain that human beings and all other mammals can suffer from this type of error is extreme. If, therefore, we really want to know what are the significant points in history, we have to ask which are the moments in history when attitudes were changed. These are the moments when people are hurt because of their former "values."

Think of the house thermostat in your home. The weather changes outdoors, the temperature of the room falls, the thermometer switch in the living room goes through its business and switches on the furnace; and the furnace warms the room and when the room is hot, the thermometer switch turns it off again. The system is what is called a homeostatic circuit or a servocircuit. But there is also a little box in the living room on the wall by which you *set* the thermostat. If the house has been too cold for the last week, you must move it up from its present setting to make the system now oscillate around a new level. No amount of weather, heat or cold or whatever, will change that setting, which is called the "bias" of the system. The temperature

of the house will oscillate, it will get hotter and cooler according to various circumstances, but the setting of the mechanism will not be changed by those changes. But when *you* go and *you* move that bias, you will change what we may call the "attitude" of the system.

Similarly, the important question about history is: *Has the bias or setting been changed?* The episodic working out of events under a single stationary setting is really trivial. It is with this thought in mind that I have said that the two most important historic events in my life were the Treaty of Versailles and the discovery of cybernetics.

Most of you probably hardly know how the Treaty of Versailles came into being. The story is very simple. World War I dragged on and on; the Germans were rather obviously losing. At this point, George Creel, a public relations man --- and I want you not to forget that this man was a granddaddy of modern public relations --- had an idea: the idea was that maybe the Germans would surrender if we offered them soft armistice terms. He therefore drew up a set of soft terms, according to which there would be no punitive measures. These terms were drawn up in fourteen points. These Fourteen Points he passed on to President Wilson. If you are going to deceive somebody, you had better get an honest man to carry the message. President Wilson was an almost pathologically honest man and a humanitarian. He elaborated the points in a number of speeches: there were to be "no annexations, no contributions, no punitive damages..." and so on. And the Germans surrendered.

We, British and Americans --- especially the British ---

continued of course to blockade Germany because we didn't want them to get uppity before the Treaty was signed. So, for another year, they continued to starve.

The Peace Conference has been vividly described by Maynard Keynes in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919).

The Treaty was finally drawn up by four men: Clemenceau, "the tiger," who wanted to crush Germany; Lloyd George, who felt it would be politically expedient to get a lot of reparations out of Germany, and some revenge; and Wilson, who had to be bamboozled along. Whenever Wilson would wonder about those Fourteen Points of his, they took him out into the war cemeteries and made him feel ashamed of not being angry with the Germans. Who was the other? Orlando was the other, an Italian.

This was one of the great sellouts in the history of our civilization. A most extraordinary event which led fairly directly and inevitably into World War II. It also led (and this is perhaps more interesting than the fact of its leading to World War II) to the total demoralization of German politics. If you promise your boy something, and renege on him, framing the whole thing on a high ethical plane, you will probably find that not only is he very angry with you, but that his moral attitudes deteriorate as long as he feels the unfair whiplash of what you are doing to him. It's not only that World War II was the appropriate response of a nation which had been treated in this particular way; what is more important is the fact that the demoralization of that nation was expectable from this sort of treatment. From the demoralization of Germany, we, too, became demoralized. This is why I say that the Treaty of Versailles was an attitudinal

turning point.

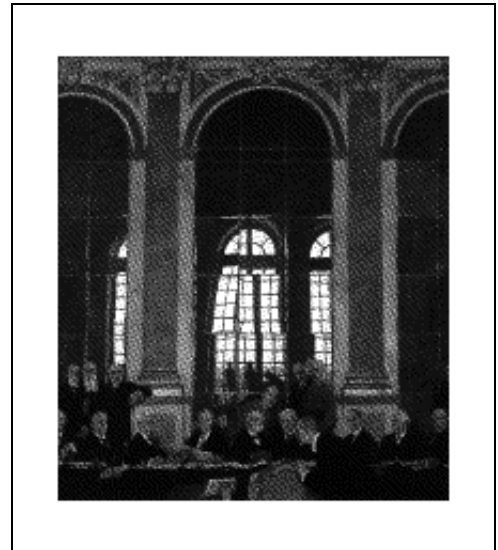
I imagine that we have another couple of generations of aftereffects from that particular sellout to work through. We are, in fact, like members of the house of Atreus in Greek tragedy. First there was Thyestes' adultery, then Atreus' killing of Thyestes' three children, whom he served to Thyestes at a peace-making feast. Then the murder of Atreus' son, Agamemnon, by Thyestes' son, Aegistheus; and finally the murder of Aegistheus and Clytemnestra by Orestes. It goes on and on. The tragedy of oscillating and self-propagating distrust, hate, and destruction down the generations.

I want you to imagine that you come into the middle of one of these sequences of tragedy. How is it for the middle generation of the house of Atreus? They are living in a crazy universe. From the point of view of the people who started the mess, it's not so crazy; they know what happened and how they got there. But the people down the line, who were not there at the beginning, find themselves living in a crazy universe, and find themselves crazy, precisely because they do not know how they got that way.

To take a dose of LSD is all right, and you will have the experience of being more or less crazy, but this will make quite good sense because you know you took the dose of LSD. If, on the other hand, you took the LSD by accident, and then find yourself going crazy, not knowing how you got there, this is a terrifying and horrible experience. This is a much more serious and terrible experience, very different from the trip which you can enjoy if you know you took the LSD.

Now consider the difference between my generation and you who are under twenty-five. We all live in the same crazy universe whose hate, distrust, and hypocrisy relates back (especially at the international level) to the Fourteen Points and the Treaty of Versailles.

We older ones know how we got here. I can remember my father reading the Fourteen Points at the breakfast table and saying, "By golly, they're going to give them a decent armistice, a decent peace," or something of the kind. And I can remember, but I will not attempt to verbalize, the sort of thing he said when the Treaty of Versailles came out. It wasn't printable. So I know more or less how we got here.



But from your point of view, we are absolutely crazy, and you don't know what sort of historic event led to this craziness. *The fathers have eaten bitter fruit and the children's teeth are set on edge.* It's all very well for the fathers, they know what they ate. The children don't know what was eaten.

--- from *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind*  
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