The Fate of Personal Adjustment in the Process of Modernization*

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FEW IDEAS have had wider currency among prominent commentators on social life than the belief that the city and its attendant industrial civilization are alien to "natural" man and inevitably breed social disorganization and personal confusion.¹ Thomas Jefferson could see some good even in yellow fever since, as he said, "it will discourage the growth of great cities in our nation, and I view great cities as pestilential to the morals, the health, and the liberties of man."² A century later Henry Adams saw in New York City a cylinder which had exploded to throw great masses of stone and steam against the sky, creating an air of "movement and hysteria" in which "prosperity never before imagined, power never yet willed by men, speed never reached by anything but a meteor, had made the world irritable, nervous, querulous, unreasonable, and afraid."³

Such images of urban life and industrial civilization were not limited to philosophers and artists, but were also held by leaders of the burgeoning social sciences in the twentieth century. Pitirim Sorokin (1957) was profoundly

* Prepared for delivery at the 1968 Tokyo-Kyoto Meetings of the International Anthropological Association, this document is a report of the Harvard Project on Social and Cultural Aspects of Development, Center for International Affairs, Harvard University. The project has been supported by a number of different private foundations and government agencies, but this particular report could not have been prepared without the assistance of a Research Grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (#1 ROI MH 15646-01 SSR). The authors also express their appreciation to the Computer Sciences Laboratory and the Biomedical Sciences Support Program of the University of Southern California. We are indebted to Lucille Kurian for her research assistance.

¹ For a review of these ideas in Western thought from Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright, see White and White (1962).
² Quoted in White and White (1962), p. 17.
³ Quoted in White and White (1962), p. 72, italics added.
convinced that the modern sensate culture was everywhere generating a great upsurge in mental illness. He argued that:

[In] “periods of transition from one fundamental form of culture and society to another ... social life ... becomes so complex, the struggle for sensory happiness is so sharp ... that the mind and nervous system of multitudes of persons cannot stand the terrific strain to which they are subjected; hence they tend to become warped or even cracked ... An inconsistent and unintegrated complex of fortuitous ideas, beliefs, emotions, and impulses ... [and] an increase of disintegration and derangement of personality is an inevitable result .... Nervous breakdowns are but another aspect of the collapse of the sociocultural order.” (pp. 206-7).

Robert Park, leader of the dominant Chicago school of sociology, felt that the city, in the very process of its growth, “creates diseases and vices which tend to destroy the community.” “In place of the simple, spontaneous modes of behavior which enable the lower animals to live without education and without anxiety,” he argued, the city creates men “compelled to supplement original nature with special training and with more elaborate machinery until life, losing its spontaneity, seems in danger of losing all its joy.” The peasant who comes to work in the city, Park held, is the proto-typical case for observing the threat to individual integrity inherent in urban life. “Man, translated to the city,” he remarked, “has become a problem to himself and society in a way and to an extent he never was before.”

If Park could make this observation about migrants within the framework of already industrialized Western society, how much greater should be the impact on men in more traditional and isolated cultures whom life and circumstance have lifted from the quiet and security of their villages to cast them into the maelstrom of urban industrial life? J. S. Slotkin (1960) spoke for many, perhaps the overwhelming majority, of anthropologists when he said:

“No matter how compatible industrialism may seem to be, since industrialism is usually a fundamental innovation, it and its ramifications tend to produce cultural disorganization. Therefore, one is confronted by two alternative social programs: is forced rapid industrialization worth the severe cultural disorganization it usually entails, and its attendant social and personal maladjustment? Or is it more important to maintain cultural organization, conserving social and personal adjustment, even though it means slow voluntary adjustment?” (p. 31).

By no means do all anthropologists accept the inevitability of the deleterious effects of migration, urban residence, and industrial labor which Slotkin seemed to assume. Some, like Oscar Lewis (1952), have emphasized the relative transferability of socio-cultural patterns from the village to the city, patterns which protect the individual from exposure to excessive disorganization and consequent personal disorder. In his study of the migration of Tepoztecan peasants to Mexico City, he found “little evidence of disorganization and breakdown, or culture conflict, or of irreconcilable differences between generations.” So far as the individual is concerned, Lewis reported, the Tepoztecan peasants “adapt to city life with far greater ease than do American farm families.”

1 Quoted in White (1962), pp. 162–166.