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The Future of Belief

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I could start by announcing, "Western epistemology is in crisis!"-but most readers would find the line pretentious. The chatty alternative, "The world these days makes less sense," sounds nearly as trite as the journalistic, "People are a lot more cynical than they used to be," and I find myself hesitant to make what seems an extravagant claim: "A serious shift has occurred in *knowing* and *believing*, in the ways we see, take in, think about, and affirm the world."

Nonetheless, it has. Something has happened to belief-not religion's much disputed "loss of faith," but a shift in modes of cognitive activity. Abilities to distinguish, verify, and conclude are impaired. We still have our eyes and ears, of course. The instruments we use to extend them, however, not only deform indirect experience, but make direct apprehension seem narrow by comparison. As electronic media train us to see and hear in new ways, old ways fall into disuse, and one result is the odd epistemic mood that pervades our times. The Undecidability Principle seems to have seeped from physics into everyday life, and firm conviction slips away. Some of us have settled into skepticism; others, into the chronic fear of being deceived. Passion and ardor have drained away, with the emptied space silted up with distractions. We have lost our ability to believe in belief.

It hardly seems worth noting that things were not always so. The modern Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gassett suggested the term *creencias* to name those embedded certitudes and core convictions so taken for granted as not to be called into question. *Creencias* are assumptions that seem to need no assent-"what everybody knows"-conclusions settled for us so long ago that they stand merely as the background from which we always begin. Not exactly absolutes, they are simply there, in place, given. For Ortega, *creencias* seem to exist before we begin to think; they are less truths we "have" than truths we "inhabit."

Most anyone can think of examples:

* water runs downhill;
* human beings are different from machines;
* counting and measuring define the physical world;

* certain people, places, and things are beautiful;
* higher forms of life are divided into male and female.

The list could easily be lengthened, revealing how extensive is the repertory of shared, practical understanding with which we work out our everyday questions and problems. Like the common sense found in proverbs, however, these givens exist in some peculiar way that prevents mapping precisely how they overlap, support, or even contradict each other. And this unmappability of our shared understanding has made it vulnerable.

For well over a century, believability has been in decline, as existing society came under attack, especially by the European intellectuals who tirelessly demonstrated how our cultural codes justify exploitation. Traditional religion was painted as superstition for pacifying underlings; polite society, as a screen for unconscious and illicit drives. Bourgeois rectitude was declared a mask for alienation from work, the self, and other people. From the upper intellectual and social classes, doubts about the codes governing civilized life spread gradually down the social ladder. Relationships between men and women, parents and children, no longer seemed transparent but were perceived to conceal dark secrets and self-deceptions. When stories of private life (once thought separate from the public sphere) became the stuff of everyday publishing, innocence became implausible.

Years of such critiques not only influenced our view of public life, but had important effects upon our trust in the givenness of our shared *creencias*. At the same time that we were taught to view political regimes as ideological-powered by justifications for appropriating authority-critics (especially partisans of Freudian or Marxist theory) were also teaching suspicion of the commonplace world: Neither official nor personal appearances should be trusted, for they conceal a drive for control beneath their seeming beneficence. As we were taught, so we learned; and this dual distrust of the political and the personal has long since become an integral part of the way we regard our everyday circumstances.

The breakup of comprehensive political ideologies--even of the comprehensive Communist doctrines that promised emancipation--accounts for only one of the flights from certainty. Consider the epistemological effect of television, which rains images upon us, cascading pictures claiming to be actualities and copies claiming to be originals. Not only does the jumble of sight and sound overwhelm sensibility, but the disjointed segments defy coherent form. The isolation of the viewer eliminates public interaction, just as the constantly flickering surface eliminates private reflection-and thus drains away from us trust in the *creencias* that require both public and private space. For the marketers who crave the trust of a mass audience, the sponsorship of nonstop distraction and discontinuity ends, ironically, in subverting any possibility of trust.

As electronics brings together television and computers, surrogates become more common, and actualities more neglected. And when materiality fades, the connection words once had with things is loosened. In some academic and entertainment realms the notion has been advanced that all perception is inevitably distorted by sensory bias. As audiences accede- not captive, of course, but unable to answer back-they accept an arbitrarily mediated world. Merging detached symbols, illuminated banalities, facsimiles without anterior substance, transient celebrities, and

the laugh track, electronic presentation makes hitherto unimagined demands upon our cognitive abilities-and less and less is as it appears to be.

Even while contemporary science seems determined to reduce mental and emotional states to a material base, the legitimacy of the tangible is being eroded. Among computer programs now available is a sort of over- the-counter remedy for accuracy that permits one to "improve" photographs by taking out a face here or moving a limb there. Little concerned to distinguish the fake from the real, the copy from the thing, we learn to prefer simulations, and the actual-drab by comparison-is relinquished.

Day after day, the news brings catastrophes, incurable diseases, cruelty, avarice, fraud, and malfeasance. The media's tireless depiction of suffering ends by enfeebling the viewers who recognize their inability to correct it all. News analysis is of little help. Research reports disagree on putative causes and possible cures; they tell of ameliorative projects failing or even making things worse. News about such reports is often accompanied by the reactions of advocates who protest, make demands and accusations, claim rights ignored and victimization-followed by official denials, inconsistent versions of events, and contradictory statistics, all so tangled as never to be sorted out between commercials.

Even for inattentive watchers, the unceasing display of misery and of experts endlessly disputing creates a sense of disarray. Feeling not "compassion fatigue" but inadequacy in the face of cognitive overload, they may realize (at some critical mass of incoherence) that things are beyond their control-and the watchers feel abandoned by the civic world. But if they come to see that things are beyond anyone's control, then they are even more lost, and an even larger crisis of confidence can be anticipated. Politicians, referring in recent years to "the politics of meaning," must be aware of voter distrust. But they cannot admit, if they know, how deep go the sources of failed comprehensibility.

One openly acknowledged source of fading substantiality is the coup d'etat attempted in epistemology by the postmodernists. Their difficult tracts are largely unread outside academic circles, of course. But their orienting framework has nonetheless achieved remarkable currency among ordinary citizens, and their ideas have migrated into everyday speech.

The postmodernists are only the latest intellectuals to repudiate authority and foundations, but (perhaps more than any earlier thinkers) their style has struck a chord in street-level nihilism. Playful and faddish, strewing their talk with a chic vocabulary, they strike subversive poses even while declaiming theatrical phrases like "end of the subject" or "death of the author" that ought to be-but surprisingly seem not to be-foreign to the common citizen's understanding.

The reason for the visibility of these notions, I think, is that postmodernism names the actual discrepancies now in our public eye and ear: fragmentation, randomness, disconnection, irony, impermanence, ambiguity, and marginality. Beguiling surfaces are what count in a desubstantialized world where presence depends upon our "gaze"-as it does in the cyberspace of endlessly multiplied images.

A few decades ago, the "Death of the Enlightenment" was a phrase current among European

intellectuals who saw corrupted everywhere the promise of progress and liberation under the rule of Reason. The Enlightenment, in breaking with archaic and biblical forms of understanding, had asserted that things are wholly accessible to scrutiny-and hence could be known, described, and explained in direct, comprehensive, and reliable forms. When narrowed into its instrumental uses, however, rationality (according to this view) fell into the service of a state apparatus and became a means for designing "rationalized" exploitation of man and nature.

To be sure, death was a premature verdict. Some scholars had recognized much earlier that flaws had been built into the foundations of the Enlightenment. Others pointed out that it thrust aside less assertive forms of knowing. Nonetheless, its aplomb, its sense of certainty and uniform intelligibility with mankind as center, long survived.

Recent radical challenges seem to have wounded that optimism. All observations, the postmodernists claim, are relative to the perspective of observers. Since each sighting is a partial fiction-one story told in one linguistic structure-no unified account can be expected. Exterior authority has been deposed, and no source for adjudicating competing versions is available. The task of critical postmodern thinking is the dismantling of narratives to expose their hidden interests and oppressive intentions-whereupon the old assumptions about foundational reality will be abandoned.

The cumulative effect of all this has been to push Enlightenment epistemology into senescence. While contradictions abound in postmodernist analysis, both its tone (smart, unsentimental, leveling, quarrelsome, transgressive, ridiculing) and its paranoia about power seem to speak for widespread popular disbelief-especially of the outpourings of quasi-official messages, excuses, and exhortations. Its attack on the foundations of knowledge has penetrated into areas once not open to question by showing how ambiguous are all those reported, second-hand worlds.

Cultural anthropology, for example, has become beset with doubts whether investigators can actually penetrate and translate findings about preliterate cultures into our first-world languages. Similarly, psychotherapists have come to see the self as a destabilized and contrived presence, with sexual identity a construction that will not withstand close inspection. Our old *creencias* of maleness and femaleness have begun to fall apart, oddly accompanied by creeping distrust of intimate relationships between any of the several sexes- contaminated anyway by fears of infection, with extensive instruction about safe practices given little credence.

Not surprisingly, chronic hesitancy toward truth claims, denial of personal agency, and radical relativizing of standards turn out to be disruptive and even cruel when adopted for everyday living. The acclamation of such notions breeds among vulnerable individuals a debility of moral sense and a draining away of resolution. Erased boundaries and multiple perspectives offered as therapeutic may seem to allow escape from the confines of custom, but they also blur distinctions needed to decide, to choose, and to change. One cannot, after all, stand either everywhere or nowhere.

It nearly goes without saying that another attack on the *creencias* has been made in the name of

multiculturalism. The goal of diversity has come to rule our institutions, as multiculturalists routinely hector the citizenry about its indifference and parochial attitudes and various advocacy groups jostle for position, funds, and attention. The effect is to diminish the meaning of any outlook or practice. Assailed with charges and denunciations, the common audience feels not only the intended doubts about itself, but doubts about everything.

This process is easily traced in the arts. Despite years of subsidies by taxpayers, the art industry has scorned dissent from nonprofessionals- assuming their views to be tainted by prejudices and limited information. And as audiences have been treated, so they have become: For a large portion of the population, aesthetic and moral concepts once held as *creencias* have been displaced by a vocabulary of pragmatic utility and the relativity of taste.

The same process has become manifest in politics, where the very arguments by which special interests urge us to listen to them have undermined our ability to listen to anyone. The process also appears in the administrative use of experts whose depersonalized technical vocabulary (originally a way of asserting the significance of their speech) has succeeded only in diminishing the vitality of all language- especially the ordinary speech in which citizens once affirmed the *creencias* of their shared world. And the process shows up as well in the clumsy interventions of government agencies into realms formerly managed by the family: asserting that parents are incapable of proper child care and discipline, and then failing miserably to replace parents, the state at last manages to convince us only that proper child care and discipline is beyond reach.

But perhaps the clearest example of this process whereby the attempt to replace our *creencias* with other epistemic ways has undermined confidence in local ways of knowing occurs in research into the causes of crime and deviance. The claim that criminal behavior is explained by hidden social or psychological forces is difficult for nonprofessionals to challenge. The exculpation heard ever since sociology adopted its mechanical model of explanation has been matched with contemporary biomedical research arguing that the mind is merely an electrochemical apparatus. Belief in choice cannot be maintained, and our status as active moral agents is gradually diminished, with very real political implications. Democracy requires a belief in human agency, intention, and purpose. If we may no longer blame, convict, or reproach, how might we praise?

From a Fascist prison in the 1930s, Antonio Gramsci wrote at length to try to persuade fellow revolutionaries that culture was a forcewhich could shape consciousness independently of material conditions. His point is one we should take seriously, for we have today evidence that a culture of opposition and distrust can be produced without a base in class structures or integrated political doctrine. The unity of the old political left in America has been successfully broken by a crowd of apparently freestanding causes. As the demands for change accumulate, the sense of permanent and irreconcilable grievance has spread. Unhindered by dialectical critique, "Hostile-Adversarial" becomes a familiar look on television, radio, films, and concerts, breeding a contagion of grudge, resentment, and sullen discontent.

While hostility was cultivated in early radical struggles to create party solidarity, current expressions offer only distraction. Among the young especially, a pervasive individualist bias,

a lack of interest in locating underlying sources of common problems, and the physical arrangements of mass spectacles all insure that despite chanting for freedom the disaffected will never confront the contradictions of wealthy investors subsidizing pop nihilism or huge conglomerates managing radical performers.

Theodore Adorno notes the anomaly of unbridled individualism appearing at the same time in which the "individual" is vanishing. This anomaly is felt especially by the people who come to the cities to pursue professional careers. Having freed themselves from settled place and identity, isolated yet wary of binding commitments, they retreat to a sovereign selfhood and a refusal to believe in the interiority of other selves. Detached as individuals, they see themselves not only each as a center, but each as the *only* center. In response to fears of inauthenticity, and in pursuit of promises about personal re-inventability, they continuously re-edit their public identity. Hyper- reflexive about the self, their attachment to external reality correspondingly weakens, and the objective world dissolves in subjectivity.

Curiously colliding with both reductionist neuro-science and postmodern nihilism-and brought indoors by television-this decay of objectivity only succeeds in a decay of subjectivity: the stable self dissolves into fragments, discontinuity, and freedom without content. Just as the self of radical individualism gradually derealizes the outside world, so too that self is derealized in turn.

It may be that the classical *creencias* of ordinary people could not have survived the decay of rural life. Knowledge may have been grounded in routines of farming, in the factuality of domesticated animals, in manual skills, in extended families living in long-settled communities in places known closely and well. However limited and incomplete its hierarchies of authority, obligation, and worth may now seem, it was comprehensive for a specific way of life, detailed in its implications for action, conveyed in ordinary language, and secure in its substance.

But with the rise of mass communication, new information collected by specialized methods and trained observers was gained without being learned and shared through practical activity. Until the late nineteenth century, it was commonly thought that the two lines of knowledge were complementary; the breakdown between the sources of knowledge (or at least the common acceptance of the fact of breakdown) is fairly recent. An immediately apprehended lifeworld of meaning based on experience and related to a body of practical knowledge vernacularly expressed is now in opposition to a more widely influential world of very different bodies of knowledge and the modes of acquiring them.

The old *creencias*, long relied upon, lost their monopoly, but their claimed replacements have grown away from general intelligibility. When Isaac Newton plotted planetary orbits from a vantage point in England, his work showed how significant knowledge could be gained even by a single observer. Nature was simply "there," commonly available for inspection and the tallying of regularities. But the idyll of direct reading of nature, of discovery by simple looking and counting, could not last. The stuff of physical reality was eventually perceived to be particles and energies well beyond individual sensibility. While physical data can be validated by physics' internal procedures, science now confounds Newton's world of stable objects in uniform motion, distinctly observed.

Similarly, no vantage allows a comprehensive vision of political economy. In the unbounded reaches of statistical complexity, exact forecast is a discarded hope. The ability to assume causal explanation fades when cause and effect become entangled in endless disagreements about mathematical models, predictive failures, cross-disciplinary integrations, orienting paradigms, and factorial determinants. Huge silos of computerized research findings from dozens of fields provide no steady place on which we might stand.

Since the first half of this century, people have noticed how less dependably authority can be asserted in everyday life. By the 1950s, Hannah Arendt, writing of "an ever-widening and deepening crisis," could put it directly: "Authority has vanished from the modern world." The method of doubt that guided early science reappears today as vagrant distrust of essential being. The relation between the knower and known is destabilized, and there appears a refusal of authoritative criteria for distinguishing between competing construals of how things reliably are. One can notice among the young, for example, a resentment of objectivity as somehow authoritarian, as a burden on freedom, imagination, and reinvention of selves, an impediment to some unnamed transcendence.

So, too, we find an operative denial that things have a resistant nature. Any entity can, with the application of sufficient force, apparently be changed into something quite else-and the transformation is taken to demonstrate the neutral and equivalent character of all things. Universal plasticity-of commodities, and even of the human body- declares a turning away from the integrity of being and a decline in the believability of qualities.

With believability challenged day by day, ordinary people try to cope by compartmentalizing their beliefs or by making gestures like the yellow ribbons tied around trees after a public tragedy. The huge rallies for short-lived causes, the bumptious street celebrations following team victories, the memorials for dead celebrities show a hunger not only for heroes but for being part of something, being for something, being somebody.

None of this tames the daily torrent of sound and facts into coherence. Dispossessed of our *creencias*, we come to see that we have been left alone to replace the sense that has been withdrawn or abandoned. When convictions flee, people are left (as Ortega y Gassett put it) with a feeling of "shipwreck." In the search for firm ground, some rely on therapists, counselors who are themselves immersed in modernity's contradictions. For young people, orphaned from exemplars of the good, prospects seem worse. Rushing to make new shrines of the natural environment, or computers, or space travel, or ethnicity, or nationalism, we find only ramshackle, one-owner cosmologies offering poor shelter.

It seems obvious to say that cognition-apprehending, knowing, believing, and discerning-is changing against a background of near-chaotic complexity. But such an assertion is difficult to accept for those whose work depends on intelligibility, and we must guard against the claim that we ourselves remain free to see things "as they really are," exempt from the reshaping movements or somehow standing on an Archimedean Point above any deformation.

We cannot deny, however, that great transformations of belief do take place. We all admit that

when an age or culture has passed it is difficult to recapture its lost *creencias*. The fact that we are well into such a transformation is the conclusion of thinkers as serious as Jacques Barzun and Alasdair MacIntyre. At some point, of course, disorder provides the impetus for the creation of new forms of order.

Perhaps others have a plan for these new forms. I do not. But we need to think clearly about our responsibilities in our present circumstances. This implies, among much else, refusing the torpid, dumbed-down talk that numbs thought. It means turning away from the cant and humbug of "lifestyle," "role model," "self-esteem," "career path," and "human resources." It means espousing clarity and candor in speech, free of official guff and pretense-a valuing of vernacular plain telling. It means turning off the packaged voices, the river of mediated sight and sound, so as to hear one's own voice.

Thinking clearly also requires us to refuse the cognitive relativism casually passed about these days; not flinching from judging mediocrity and not explaining away human accountability. Thinking clearly could benefit as well from joining with others similarly troubled about our condition, helping to repair community and shared sensibility, and attending to the particularity of creation. It requires finally a resolve to speak for the presence of God in our lives. That could be a beginning.