

JANUARY 6 AND ITS AFTERMATH: MORAL INVERSION 21st CENTURY STYLE

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On 4 February 2021, *The Atlantic* magazine posted an article titled, “The Moral Inversion of the Republican Party.” The author, Paul Wehner, never alludes to the work of Michael Polanyi or explicitly defines what he means by “moral inversion,” but he does hint at a definition when he says that “the most damaging error...was prying apart politics from morality, viewing politics simply as a means to gain and hold power.” Moral inversion, for Wehner, seems to be the result of disconnecting political practice from ethics. While his phrasing is not identical with Polanyi’s discussion of moral inversion, it certainly resonates. Moral inversion, I think, serves as a useful lens for interpreting not only the attack on the Capitol building, but also some dimensions of our current political problems in the United States.

Polanyi treats moral inversion as one of the factors, if not the most important one, in the collapse of liberal Europe and the rise of Marxism and fascism. He argues that the passions that drove those revolutions could be traced to the ways that positivism rejected the notion of moral ideals, since such ideals were not “objective,” i.e., they could not be verified “scientifically.” As Polanyi puts it, moral inversion takes place when “people pursue moral ideals within a system of thought that denies reality to moral scruples” (*PK* 234). The result is that what is immoral appeals to someone’s moral passions (*PK* 232). He later seems to equate moral passions with a fervor for social betterment (*TD* 58). Under certain conditions, moral inversion results in a “creed of salvation by violence” (*M* 28). Moral inversion thus resembles a philosophy in which what is perceived as a moral end can be pursued by any means.

While I do not think we have enough evidence to indict either Republicans (as a whole or even in part) or the insurrectionists of January 6 for being positivists in any technical sense, it does seem that moral passions have been divorced from any grounding in truth. The insurrectionists who stormed the US capital on January 6 gathered first at a rally dedicated to “stopping the steal” and so saw themselves as patriots who were preserving the integrity of the election. These people and others believed in the fiction that then President Trump had won re-election in a landslide, despite the fact that for weeks elected officials, such as Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger in Georgia (the state where I live) vigorously defended the results of the election and that lawsuits alleging election fraud were thrown out for lack of evidence here, in Pennsylvania, and several other states.

The inversions of this situation seem patently obvious to those who have eyes to see. In the name of preserving the integrity of the vote, the insurrectionists of Jan. 6 were actually subverting it. In the name of patriotism, they were attempting to destroy democratic practices. Such passion disconnected from truth can be seen, too, in supporters of former President Trump who have treated Republicans who voted to impeach by censuring them, making death threats against them, and/or promising to vote them out of office in the next round of mid-term elections. Whatever may be the virtues and vices of other groups, the Republican Party’s complicity with “Trumpism” is a particularly clear expression of moral inversion that has stimulated what some are calling a civil war within the party. To what extent the Republican Party has betrayed its best and highest convictions is something that will indeed keep pundits and political scientists exploring for the foreseeable future.

In any case, our society does not seem to be one that Polanyi describes in *Science, Faith, and Society*, one that is “dedicated to the fourfold proposition (1) that there is such a thing as truth; (2) that all members love it; (3) that they feel obliged and (4) are in fact capable of pursuing it” (71). He goes on to say on that same page that if we begin to think that others no longer share that love of truth, our own confidence in the existence of truth will wane. What he acknowledges a bit further on that page is that we cannot foster such dedication in theory. Instead, these propositions have to be embodied in the “practice of an art” that is carried on by civil institutions that are themselves imbedded in a tradition that is passed on from generation to generation.

At least part of the solution to our present predicament would then seem to require rebuilding the institutions that have supported democratic processes. Here I find Jeffrey Stout’s description of democracy to be useful: a tradition of giving reasons and holding other people accountable to give reasons (2004, 13-14). Of course, political institutions can only be part of it. Educational institutions need to teach that truth is a quest, not simply a possession. As Polanyi learned from his work in labs as a physical chemist, reality is that which promises to reveal itself to us in unexpected ways in the future (*TD* 32). Our understanding of reality, our knowledge of what is true, is therefore always incomplete. To say that, however, is not to say that our claims about truth are wrong. It is instead to recognize that we need to commit ourselves to continued exploration and learning, or, as Matt Crawford puts it, we have to become people who “love the truth more than you love your own current level of understanding” (2015, 63). Other elements of civil society, too, must reinforce this commitment and these practices so that our moral passions, i.e., our determination to achieve a better life, are directed toward something that is truly good, using means that are consonant with that vision of the good.

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