

# Overdetermined

Morris Berman

‘Overdetermined’ was a word coined by Freud. It referred to the convergence of factors that made personality, or neurosis, a sure thing. By age 5, he argued, it was all over: what we were at 5 was what we would be at 85. Of course, most of us evolve a bit, knock the rough edges off, manage to become a bit more mature. But fundamentally speaking, we remain the same person for all of our lives. ‘Overdetermined’ suggests that serious change is nearly impossible, because coming from a number of sources, the various factors converge to ‘freeze’ one into a particular constellation, as it were. Freud believed that his ‘talking cure’ could effect such a change, but I’m skeptical of the notion that intellectual approaches to emotional problems can accomplish this. The result is that for the most part, we are who we are; the underlying structure remains intact.

Freud also argued, however, that neurosis could be a good thing. Self-transparency could work against us, render the ‘fixed’ self unable to do its work in the world. In the same vein, Isaiah Berlin pointed out that if Van Gogh had had access to therapy, so that he might become a ‘well-adjusted’ individual, it isn’t very likely that we would have the benefit of all of those stunning paintings – among the greatest art in the history of the world. In short, ‘normal’ might not be such a positive thing.

I sometimes consider my own situation, and realize that by the age of 8, if not before, I looked around me and decided I really didn’t want to be normal. America is the ultimate hustling, competitive, put-down society, and on a visceral level, I understood this. So unlike Frank Sinatra, I really *did* do it my way; and the result is a ‘career’ that I’m fairly proud of. But there are costs to doing it your way – namely, that the creativity could emerge from a neurotic base (something I explored in the final chapter

of my book *Coming to Our Senses* – Simon & Schuster, 1989), and that you can expect to be alone. Oh sure, I have good friends, and have had a number of girlfriends; but in the end, you really are by yourself, if you take this path. But you take it because you are convinced that the alternative is much worse; and I am so convinced.

However, suppose you decide that you want to alter the trajectory of your life, which is to say, your destiny. I explored this in a collection of stories I wrote titled *Destiny* (CreateSpace, 2011). The first story (really a novella) concludes that any effort to make such a change is bound to fail. The second story says that change is possible, but that one would be faced with a lot of anxiety as a result. And the third story asks the question: Why bother? I have thought a lot about all of these options.

Facts – the intellectual approach – are pretty much powerless against mythologies, and our individual mythologies are a big part of our destinies. There are by now a number of studies showing that when someone holds irrational beliefs, and is presented with hard evidence that disproves them, s/he will reject that evidence so that the neurotic constellation can be preserved. A typical (social) example is the religious cult that predicts the end of the world on a certain date. The date comes, apocalypse doesn’t occur, and rather than deciding that their belief system is a load of hooey, the ‘true believers’ simply move the date ahead. One downside of this (among many) is that these types of groups rarely produce any Van Goghs.

In any case, at the micro, or individual, level, we all do this, so as to protect ourselves against change, and against any serious soul-searching. There is a gain in this, of course, but also (inasmuch as most of us *aren’t* Van Goghs) a

very real loss: we wind up living mechanical, programmed lives, without even realizing it. Dialogue with others is not real dialogue; it's just mutual affirmation of a common value system. In America, bubbas talk with bubbas, progressives and 'wokes' talk with progressives and 'wokes', and very few people venture outside of their comfort zone.

Freud also pointed out that neurosis was hardly limited to individuals. Whole societies, he argued, whole civilizations, could be neurotic. And in such (macro) cases, the same stuckness applies. Here are some examples from my own experience.

My first book was a study of the Royal Institution of Great Britain, and more generally, the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the development of science in England. It focused particularly on the most obvious feature of British life: hierarchy and class society. But if it's obvious, most British citizens don't want it pointed out. The book remains a mainstay of graduate programs in the history of science, but beyond that, it made no difference whatsoever. There was no serious discussion, in its wake, of the nature of class society. Instead, a few scholars associated with the Royal Institution banded together to refute the claims of the book (somewhat hard to do, given the mountain of footnotes and data I provided), and the result was a bit of a joke. Their book was about heat, rather than light (e.g. one writer called me a sixties counter-culture person). Oddly enough, they never mentioned the name of my book (I guess they regarded it as hexed, or contagious in some way). If they had taken my argument (and that of many other critics) seriously, it could have possibly led to a public or media discussion of class society in England, and how damaging such social arrangements are. But no: let's just take a defensive position, live in denial, and protect privileged arrangements at all cost. British institutions must remain sacred.

Of course, this national neurosis, amounting to institutions such as Eton, Harrow and Winchester, was the backbone of empire, and

helped to make England the de facto ruler of the world. For at least a century, the sun never *did* set on the British Empire. This was perhaps a good thing (unless you talked to Indians and other victims of colonialism), but the whole configuration finally worked against England, in a number of ways; and as the twentieth century wore on, it couldn't maintain its hegemony, and finally became largely irrelevant on the world stage. Yet class inequality didn't change one iota; under Margaret Thatcher, for example, England, utterly unwilling to engage in any self-transparency, crushed its working class. No surprise, Freud would have said.

A second example: Japan. The most obvious feature of Japanese society is group consciousness and behavior, which has both positive and negative aspects to it. Hence the name of my study of the nation, *Neurotic Beauty: An Outside Looks at Japan* (Water Street Press, 2019). But when it got reviewed in the Tokyo English-language newspaper, the *Japan Times*, it was clear that the Japanese media wanted to hear about the beauty, but not about the neurosis. The original reviewer, who was not Japanese, gave it a rave review (he told me). This got thrown out by his Japanese boss, who wrote his own (tepid) review, so as to preserve a positive self-image. Again, this was an opportunity for a country to examine its basic assumptions. (Not that I am its only critic.) As in the case of England, it chose not to do so. So Japan limps along, not really able to solve its problems.

And finally, America. God, what could ever penetrate the American skull, whether that of its public intellectuals and so-called 'critics', or of the wo/man in the street? These 'critics' are basically phony: at heart, they continue to say that America and its value system are more or less sound, and that we will pull out of our current downward spiral, reverse the trajectory. To take a hard look, as I did, at America's most obvious feature – hustling, endless economic and technological expansion for its own sake – and to come to terms with it as being destructive and self-destructive: sorry, folks, that just ain't

gonna happen. So, *quelle surprise!* – my work is almost completely invisible, I'm not on the radar screen of any intellectual discussion, and the country can and will continue to (inevitably) sink into the grave, by doing what it has been doing since age 5, so to speak. 'Change' in America consists of diversity appointments, tearing down statues, 'editing' Mark Twain, and using politically correct language – all window-dressing. It never goes to the heart of the matter, and there are no indications that it ever will. (The only real alternative to the hustling way of life is the worldview of the Native Americans, and they are politically irrelevant.)

It's worse elsewhere, of course. Write a serious critique of Russia, or China, and if you are a citizen of those countries you could get yourself killed. Journalists in Mexico are routinely bumped off. Those few in England, or Japan, or the US, who write such critiques don't get killed; they just get marginalized and ignored – killing of a different sort, I suppose. Killing of a voice – and of an opportunity.

I realize this is pretty deterministic. I'm saying that for the most part, individuals don't change, and that countries or civilizations never do. As W.H. Auden famously put it, 'We would rather be ruined than changed'. Historically speaking, however, change *does* occur: we are not hunter-gatherers any more, or living in the Middle Ages. And we are certainly better off in some ways as a result of that cultural evolution. But it seems to me that we are also worse off in certain ways, and that as a planet, we are not headed in a healthy direction, even leaving the question of climate change aside. Technology and its associated values are doing us in (something Auden stated repeatedly), and the resistance to this trajectory is pretty feeble. How, then, does change occur?

Let me give it to you in a word: pain. On the individual level, a person changes when the pain of not changing is greater than the pain of changing. Then s/he will make the leap, as in the second story of *Destiny*. Then s/he will seek therapy, say to the therapist: 'I'm suffering. My

life is a mess. I need to get to the bottom of this, and try to become a different person.' Of course, change might not necessarily occur, but if it does happen, this – intolerable suffering – is ultimately the starting point on the road to a better life.

And for nations? No such luck, I'm afraid. Many years ago, Arnold Toynbee chronicled how every civilization rose and fell, and in the falling stage did precisely those things that got them into trouble in the first place. Change can come, but only after the system crashes, the point at which it becomes impossible for these countries to keep doing what they've been doing all along. In the case of America, it will fall apart, perhaps into separate sections of the country (via secession), and this might offer the hope of some regional rejection of the American Way of Life, which has become, truth be told, a Way of Death. This is probably a few decades down the line, but as far as I can see, it offers the only glimmer of hope possible.

*Dum spiro, spero*, wrote Cicero: As long as I breathe, I hope.

©Morris Berman, 2022

## About the contributor



**Morris Berman** is a poet, novelist, essayist, social critic, and cultural historian. He has written 17 books and nearly 200 articles, and has taught at a number of universities in Europe, North and South America, and Mexico. He

won the Governor's Writers Award for Washington State in 1990, and was the first recipient of the annual Rollo May Center Grant for Humanistic Studies in 1992. In 2000, *The Twilight of American Culture* was named a 'Notable Book' by *The New York Times Book Review*, and in 2013 Morris received the Neil Postman Award for Career Achievement in Public Intellectual Activity from the Media Ecology Association. His most recent book, a collection of short stories entitled *The Heart of the Matter*, was published in 2020.