

Change for the worse

Progress can be a good thing. But not when it's imposed from above



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We are living in times of rapid change. Forty-two years ago this month, IBM announced the birth of the new IBM 360 computers. The machine needed a room for itself and had less than 1/10,000th of the memory of today's off-the-shelf laptops. In 1973, disk-drive storage on the 360s cost US\$279 per megabyte; on today's USB flash drives, a megabyte costs a fraction of a cent. The typical laptop computer now communicates

with the Internet and other networks through Wi-Fi (Wireless Fidelity) on the electromagnetic spectrum.

Toronto Hydro, which needs to install Wi-Fi antennas on all utility poles to monitor smart electricity meters, plans to offer wireless Internet subscriptions over the whole city. Despite the lack of evidence, some people are protesting against the danger of these sorts of radio waves. For the same reason, Fred Gilbert, president of Lakehead University, refuses to allow Wi-Fi "hot spots" on campus—an admittedly different situation if you consider the university as private property where the owners can make the decisions they want. Many of today's environmentalists remind us of the Luddites, displaced English workers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries who went on rampages destroying machines.

The pace of institutional change is also breathtaking. The family and religion have been seriously challenged over the past few decades. Sexual mores are unrecognizable. One can now be sued for speech crimes before "human rights" commissions (as the publisher of this magazine currently is). Many old liberties have become new crimes.

Other changes are on the social reformers' agenda. In a 1994 book that advocates licensing parents, Dr. Jack Westman wrote: "The denial or revocation of a parenting license would be expected to be a painful experience, particularly for mothers. . . . The overall importance of protecting innocent children from incompetent parenting justifies the inconvenience to a few parents and the inevitable imperfections of a licensing system."

Resistance to change is sometimes violent, sometimes mute, sometimes virtually nonexistent. In France, a coalition of trade union interests and student organizations is trying to prevent the government from slightly liberalizing the labour market, as if France could be kept

immutably unchanged, like a museum.

Of course, our generation is not the first one to experience this feeling of rapid change, with some people enthused and others left behind or punished. The fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century, the rise of the centralized state from the 17th century on, and the democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries must have meant radical change for many contemporaries. The question is, when and how should change be resisted?

Whether in technology or in social institutions, there are two very different sorts of change. One sort comes from the exercise of private liberties, including by inventors and social innovators. For example, it has become difficult to avoid e-mail simply because most people like to communicate this way; practising one's religion is less easy when many others don't share it. We may call this sort of change "spontaneous change," as it springs from equal liberty in social interaction. The new constraints imposed by this sort of change are the social consequences of others' free interactions.

The second sort of change is very different: it is the product of some people imposing by force their own, "new" ways of doing things. Legal restrictions on free speech (as opposed to constraints imposed by morals

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or etiquette), legal attacks on certain lifestyles, and the criminalization of previously normal behaviour belong to this category of "imposed change."

These two categories of change differ not only in their origin, but also in their consequences. Spontaneous change allows dissenters to try and preserve their ways, albeit at their own cost, and allows change within change, that is, diversity or potential diversity. Imposed change, as its name implies, forces standardization, can be resisted only at very high cost (like jail) and stifles further change.

The failure to distinguish between social constraints resulting from the exercise of other individuals' equal liberty, and state constraints made of direct coercion, explains many of the problems of our times. The change that must be resisted is change imposed or encouraged by the state. **WS**