

# THE NATURE OF HUMAN NATURE

## PART II: SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

IN Part I we considered a process which seems universal, and indispensable to humanization. It is characterized by qualities of reciprocity, joy, spontaneity. We called this process Sympathetic Interaction. It takes place between an apprentice human being—an infant—and the journeymen around him. To an important extent, this process continues throughout life. But when the apprentice human being is a year or a year-and-a-half old, the process of emotional interaction is supplemented by another process, equally universal, equally indispensable to becoming and remaining a distinctively human being. This process may be called Symbolic Interaction.

In this process, a child no longer requires the physical presence of his mother or father in order to make a response. He begins to smile even when he is by himself, for he remembers his mother or father smiling at him. Part of his intrinsic human equipment is the ability to conjure up, at will, an image, a picture in his mind, a symbol.

This process apparently predates the learning of verbal symbols, but it receives its greatest thrust from language, and from then on is indissolubly bound up with those symbols we call words. When the child enters this part of his humanization, a word such as "mother," no matter what its context, will arouse an image of his own mother, smiling, singing, or whatever else may be associated with her. As time goes by, this and the child's other images grow constantly with associations, recollections, and connotations.

He adds to his storehouse of symbols a vast number of abstractions, qualities, values—such as honor and dishonor, bravery and cowardice, morality and immorality—and they become invested with operational meanings, based on his concrete observations and experiences.

And he begins to develop by far the most important symbol of them all: his conception of himself. A self-image is quintessential to humanness. It is what makes our thoughts and conduct sensible rather than absurd; consistent rather than random; purposeful rather than pointless. It is the filter through which all our other images must pass. No, filter is not a good metaphor. The Self is not so passive as that. The Self is an actor, a very busy actor. During all our sentient moments, there goes on, within our minds, a dialogue between the host of symbols with which memory equips us, and that master symbol, the Self. It is only after this internal dialogue has come to a conclusion that we act, in the form of speech, movement, or whatever.

We usually think of interaction as involving two or more individuals. But other animals interact, too, in that sense: they mill about, snarl at one another, bill and coo, panic. Those forms of interaction cannot be considered distinguishingly human. What is most extraordinary about man is that he interacts with himself—within his own skin—whether or not there is anyone else present. The expression "talking to one's self" is a quite accurate suggestion of what goes on, although the dialogue is usually subvocal.

This process, Symbolic Interaction, has so many crucial ramifications and implications it is possible to summarize only a few of them here.

In the first place, it is inherent in the process that no two human beings have ever been or shall ever be exactly alike. The images which an individual accumulates are derived from things he has seen and heard, and it is virtually inconceivable that any two persons—even identical twins—could go through life seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, feeling precisely the same things. Even if one can imagine a diabolical experiment, in which two persons are locked in a laboratory cage from infancy, and exposed to exactly the same experiences, the result would still be two different beings, because human perception depends not only on what is exterior but

what is interior, and no two people are ever going to have the same organization of the billions of neurons which make up the frontal lobes of the cerebral cortex.

A somewhat related characteristic of the process of Symbolic Interaction is its inherent creativity. Suppose that a person is outfitted with only 100 verbal symbols: a few handful of nouns, verbs, modifiers, conjunctions. These symbols could be arranged in more than one nonillion, 268 octillion (1,268,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000) different ways. If everyone on earth devised a new arrangement every ten seconds, twenty-four hours a day, it would take 70 trillion years to exhaust the possibilities. To say the least, then, there are a great many combinations in the English language—and every other—which have never yet been tried. And what is true of words is true of musical notes, colors, chemical elements, and all the other phenomena with which the human mind is able to deal.

It is in the nature of human nature not only to be capable of creativity, but to *have* to be creative. Given the number of images with which we must cope, it is mathematically impossible for our family, schools, church, and other influences to instruct us in advance on the ways in which these images should be arranged, moment by moment. Routinized though he may become, it is impossible that man be a robot, because it is impossible to anticipate every life situation in which he will find himself. The composer who writes a new symphony is not qualitatively different from the traveling salesman who adds a new detail to the latest joke, or the housewife who adds a different spice to the spaghetti when she runs out of the one called for in her cookbook.

Conduct, then, is the outcome of interaction between a unique Self, and a unique aggregation of thousands of other symbols, memories, attitudes, conceptions, values. The intercession of the Self means that there is nothing automatic about any of our behavior. A situation elicits a whole host of images—possible responses, and factors weighing for and against each. The Self reviews these options, and the arguments pro and con, makes a selection. This process of review and selection takes place

almost instantaneously. We are usually not even aware of it. But if you look at your own experience, during practically any moment of any day, and put the projector into slow motion, so to speak, you can watch the process in action.

For example, let us do a slow motion "instant replay" of the seemingly simple act of writing that last sentence. I might have said "however," to begin with, instead of "but." I might have said, "if one looks at one's personal experience." I might have said "virtually" instead of "practically," or "almost" instead of either. I could have added "waking" to "any moment." I could well have omitted the redundant "any day." I could have put the final clause at the beginning. I could have done at least fifty things differently, and if I were to start again, I probably would in fact do at least twenty-five or thirty of them differently.

A human being cannot function in any other way. There is no "automatic pilot" to which he can switch when he gets tired of thinking. Among many other things, this fact means that no mechanistic, deterministic theory of human behavior can account for our actions. The half-dozen simple choices mentioned in the foregoing paragraph cannot possibly be explained by a doctrine of instincts, imitation, stimulus-response, frustration-aggression, Oedipus complex, dialectical materialism, or any other closed, reductionist system. If the closed systems are inadequate to account for simple acts, how can they account for anything more important, like choosing a mate, or living a life?

It is implicit in the process of Symbolic Interaction—it is intrinsic to the nature of man—that he is free. He has to choose between alternatives, in everything he does. Nothing is ineluctable; nothing is fixed in the stars. We are obliged to choose, moment by moment, to exist at all.

This is not to deny that choices tend to fall into patterns. It is not to deny that the Self is to a considerable extent an adaptation of the images others have of us, as Charles H. Cooley noted in his phrase, "the looking-glass self." We cannot deny that the range of our choices is hedged in by the range of information with which we have been provided. But

we may deny that any computer exists which can predict exactly what you and I are going to do or say or think during any hour of our lives. And we may deny that any concatenation of social and cultural influences can *make* me, or you, or anybody else, do anything against our will.

Our experiences and their attendant images may dispose us, with a relatively high degree of statistical probability, toward smoking cigarettes, swooning over the Beatles, hating our parents, or whatnot. But no matter what our experiences, it is never *certain* that we will do any of these things. There is literally nothing we *have* to do. For every possible action, there is at least one possible alternative. We can say no, even to the point of death, if we want to strongly enough.

There is always the necessity of our reviewing alternatives before we act: even if we have done something ten thousand times, we must still go through the process of mental review. And it is possible that on the ten thousand-and-first time, we will do something unexpected. To decide, among various alternatives, that we shall continue doing the same thing we have done before is, in itself, a choice which arises anew as we arise with every new day.

It is quite unnecessary to argue, from any theological, philosophical, or political standpoint, that man should be free. Man is free. The question was settled ages ago by nature. Man comes with no built-in guides to action. He is forced to be free, whether he wants to be or not, whether he likes it or not. Truth to tell, he often does not like it. Man invents all kinds of dogmas and deities; he throws himself under every conceivable kind of yoke; he twists and turns and prostrates and perjures himself to convince himself that he is not free. None of it alters the nature of his nature.

Yet another implication follows from the fact that man, in order to survive at all, must make countless, continuous choices between a minimum of two alternatives and usually many more. No matter what outside influences may be at work, no one can step inside the cranium of anyone else, turn on the projector of images, stop it at a given point, and make a selection. The act of choosing is ultimately,

unavoidably, a private one. Which is to say that man is, along with his freedom, personally responsible, regardless of how he may try to deny and avoid it.

All this may be observed from a hard looking-inward on ourselves as we go about our everyday activities. That is the way to apprehend the nature of human nature, if it is to be apprehended at all: not in the aberrant; not in the lives of saints or geniuses or the insane or heroes or villains; not in salivating dogs or rats in a maze.

Human beings may on occasion act like beasts, but they cannot become beasts any more than beasts can become human beings. Man is cast into the world stripped of the instincts which guide the behavior of every other creature. He is, of necessity, personally unique, and to a great extent unpredictable. He is perforce creative, free, responsible. While he may attempt to minimize these qualities, he cannot expunge them.

Some might say this is man's fate. Others might prefer to say it is man's wonder, and glory, the reason he has prevailed so long, and will go on to prevail over this epoch's obstacles—including his own efforts to diminish himself.

*(To be concluded)*

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## *Letter from* **JORDAN**

THIS is indeed one world, in the grimmest, most dismal sense. The problem is to see what can be done about it. Under a December 17, 1969 dateline, a U.S. church paper has the headline, "Biafran Form of Hunger Kills Navajo Children." Last night, here in Amman, a British-born pediatrician, who has struggled for thirteen years to raise the standards of Jordan medicine, told us: "We have lost twenty years. During my first years here I saw at least one child-starvation case per day. When I left in 1962 we may have seen one a month. But now I see at least half a dozen, each week."

The disease indicated here is Kwashiorkor, a protein-deficiency condition common to depressed peoples everywhere. It is a sure child-killer, where protein-supplements are not readily available and above all where medical knowledge and medical services cannot be found.

My friend of many years, pediatrician, concerned human being, together with her husband, a highly educated Moslem, described for us a frightening political condition in this rump-state of Jordan. Corruption, which was never wholly absent—which, in fact even at the best reaches levels wholly intolerable to a fully developed state—has become a way of life. The cycle goes something like this.

After the Six-Day War of 1967, the oil-rich States agreed to generous subventions, totalling perhaps \$250 million a year, for Egypt and Jordan, main sufferers in the defeat by Israel. But cash, pumped into a less than fully competent governmental machine, inevitably raises two very serious problems: temptation and inflation.

While the details of corruption would be hard for an outsider to document, its overwhelming presence is clear. We heard of one Minister who, after serving a relatively brief term, retired and started a bank. In a more insidious form, available

cash is said actually to determine projects undertaken in the "development" program. The basis upon which projects are selected is the extent of the opportunity for private gain. An example adduced is the magnificent—and to my eye largely unused—King Hussein Sports City, of whose J.D. (Jordanian Dinars) 500,000 cost about 20 per cent is reliably reported to have been diverted into private pockets. Similarly, one of Jordan's newer hotels, in which the government has "a few shares," is said to be 90 per cent financed by loans from a variety of government sources cleverly pyramided by the Director and this colleagues. It is widely assumed that these loans are uncollectable, though the hotel is doing very well indeed. The Director, whom I first met fifteen years ago, is a very pleasant man.

I recall somewhat sheepishly how we used to rail against the stupidities of our A.I.D. program in Jordan. It sent "experts" to grow entirely inappropriate forms of cabbage—because that is what we knew how to grow. It sent experts so eager to terrace and make productive Jordan's stony hillsides that large local landowners, well able to pay for this development, took the U.S. government for a merciless ride. It sent other experts, who reported no water available for agriculture in the desert east of Amman. It took an indomitable old missionary to do the trick *she* found water, and began settling refugees. More recently a temporarily retired politician has also managed it, in a formidable wasteland to the east. His wells gush a quantity said to enable him to irrigate his 500 acres, and to give an equal quantity freely to his neighbors.

But A.I.D. and its failures are peanuts compared with the present condition. Jordan's inflation is assuming staggering proportions. An experienced school teacher at top grade may earn J.D. 40. per month (\$112. at official rate). We know of one whose rent for his 3-bedroom house is J.D. 35. There is a constant drain of trained and experienced citizens who, struggling to make ends meet, give up and go off to Kuwait, or Saudi

Arabia, or Libya, where salaries are phenomenally higher, or try to emigrate to Canada, Australia or the U.S.A. The chief desk clerk in our hotel is in the latter category. His two eldest sons are established in the U.S., the next is about to go off to a U.S. university, and the parents and remaining six children have applied for visas. I haven't seen the U.S. list of preferred occupations, but somehow I doubt whether hotel clerks can take much comfort in it.

We talked with our friends last night about the problem of integrity and public honesty, without, I am afraid, getting very far. Said the pediatrician: "Can you expect suffering people to be honest? If my children were hungry I think I would do *anything*." Probably true as far as it goes, but parochial. It's a poor explanation of Jordan's new hotel, and it doesn't really help us very much with such phenomena as Cosa Nostra.

We can agree, I expect, that integrity grows most easily in a soil of face-to-face, personal contact in which there is genuine mutual dependence. There is a fascinating volume, *What Is Islam*, by W. Montgomery Watt, orientalist of the University of Edinburgh. In it Islam's roots in the hard bitterness of tribal life in the desert, where the group survived or failed as a group, are laid bare. Tribal life, Watt insists, required "a high standard of human excellence." The purposes of Islam are also illuminated, roots and purposes together determining its long-term characteristics. Mohammed's clear intent is said to have been to lead—no, to force the disintegrating Arab society of the new trading urban centers of Mecca and Medina back to the simple, tried and true virtues of earlier Arab society, in the desert. Thus the determinism of hard and demanding desert conditions of life, together with the effort to re-establish ancient virtues in a new setting, may explain two of Islam's characteristics. Desert life was harsh and unchanging; Islam therefore posits the uselessness of man's individual effort, and emphasizes the five duties laid upon the Moslem's daily life. There is, in effect, nothing else

demanding. The backward look to ancient virtues' similarly, is a restraint upon change; Islam is essentially status quo, bitterly opposing change.

There is much more. But Christian adherents, accustomed to taking a patronizing or contemptuous view of Islam, might usefully meditate on the extent to which Islam may better have served its purposes and stuck to its roots than has Christianity.

ROVING CORRESPONDENT

## *REVIEW*

### THE FALSE BOUNTY OF WAR

How do far-reaching changes in the direction of men's lives and the meaning of their association actually come about? It is useless to bring such questions to the academic authorities. The sterile historiographies of scientific scholarship permit no recognition of moral longing in its own terms. They refer to "love of freedom" only by quotation and reinterpret humanistic aspirations and ennobling expressions as though these were inevitably disguises for conditioning factors or other deterministic influences which a proper historian may take into account without loss of professional standing.

All the important questions, therefore, are left to unauthorized writers. And the more informal the discussion of them, the more fruitful it is likely to be. The asides of a brief article on another subject may be more valuable as food for reflection than a ponderous inquiry. Why this should be is certainly a matter worth looking into, but at the moment we might say simply that spontaneous insight often proves more penetrating than the proceeds of labored research. Yet the right sort of research may clear the way. This seems the case in an article in the Feb. 23 *Nation*. "Kicking the Defense Habit," by James L. Treires, who served as an economist with the federal government for nearly twenty years, chiefly in the Departments of Labor and Commerce. A specialist in "long-range employment trends and economic development," in this article Mr. Treires connects these subjects with the increasing dependence of the U.S. economy on military and "defense" spending.

Most of his analysis is devoted to showing the formidable psychological obstacles to any change of this situation. He says at the outset:

The position I take here is that defense spending is the only time-proven, well-understood mechanism for maintaining high levels of employment in the United States, and that it has therefore quietly and unobtrusively become an end in itself, a pump primer

whose magnitude is determined not by an objective assessment of external threat but by the amount of defense-generated employment required to sustain full employment. Any substitute programs or expenditures will therefore be supported only if they can retain the full employment blessing while dispensing with the perpetual warfare curse.

When Mr. Treires speaks of "support" for an alternative program, he means, of course, support from men who have the power to make national decisions, and who rely on conventional economic theory for their justifications of military spending as a major stabilizing force in the economy. He gives samples of this theory, which is likely to be quite persuasive to those who think it unimportant what men make, so long as they have jobs. Mr. Treires shows that the contribution of defense industries to full employment is now held to be more important than the "protection" of the nation. As he puts it:

Notice that this defense of the military budget is not based on an assessment of national security requirements in the nuclear age; it is based on our ability to pay. It says that the United States can easily afford the current level of spending and, on the implied premise that a country should have as much military strength as it can afford, there is no good reason to retrench.

Mr. Treires reminds us that the United States did not really pull out of the great depression until we began construction of the "awesome war machine" which was finally to defeat Hitler. He notes that the resulting prosperity seemed highly moral and fully deserved:

World War II created in the American subconscious the image of the Good War. The obvious virulence of Nazism called forth a real spirit of national unity that quickly obscured the passions of the bitter class struggle of the thirties, and gave Americans a renewed faith in the future of democracy. With jobs for everyone at wages that seemed high by prewar standards, and with complete isolation from direct enemy action, the "home front" never had it so good.

After the war, the peacetime economy was beginning to falter by 1949, but was "saved" by renewed military spending for the Korean war:

Again a bad situation overseas had created good economic conditions at home.

The lesson began to sink into the government consciousness: if defense spending seems to keep the economy buoyant, why should it be reduced simply because at a given moment we are not at war or in grave danger of war? After all, who really gets hurt if the country overspends for defense?

For the first time in American history the coming of peace was not followed by quick demobilization. From the wartime peak of \$50 billion in 1953, defense spending fell only to \$40 billion in 1955; it has never gone lower.

In the years since, this writer points out, the character of military spending has changed—become less "obvious." As war became more and more "technological," the activities of "research and development" grew in importance. The spending could go on, but with certain unnoticed effects:

The defense budget not only solves the problem of numbers but also, through its emphasis on R&D and increasingly complex weapon systems, sorts out from the general population those of highest intellectual potential and diverts them into high-paying careers in defense industry. It places a premium on more and more and higher and higher education, which also keeps people out of the labor market longer and it transforms a potentially anti-Establishment group of intellectuals into a conservative pro-Establishment bloc.

So the spending continues, with nearly all big industries getting some share of the defense pie, and with colleges and universities becoming pensioners of government through "research" programs. "Who," asks Mr. Treires, "is really hurt by all this?" Doubtless we all are, in ways past imagining, but he has a specific answer:

It is that portion of the work force that cannot qualify for college, is unemployed or employed in semi-skilled or unskilled jobs, and is not organized to exert group pressure. This includes most Negroes, Mexican-Americans, poor whites, Puerto Ricans, and all the other low-paid, poorly educated people who man the nation's factories, hospitals, sanitation departments, and other basic production and service establishments.

The strength in the system is that it preserves a kind of twisted meritocracy which insures that young people with more than average ability will have good opportunities for high-paying jobs without being required to relate these jobs to anything like usefulness to the society itself. A grape picker who provides something that no one can live without for long—food—is at the bottom of the scale, while a Ph.D. microbiologist who provides something we might all be better off without—biological weapons—is at the top.

The "practical" success of military spending, in other words, has added the powerful persuasion of an economic rationale to other cultural influences which tend to prevent response to spontaneous moral perception and enable the pseudo-moralities of the military power-state to fill the vacuum. Brutish policies to dull the spreading sense of guilt are one result. Another is the revolt of youth—for whom the traditional "generation gap" has turned into an abyss of moral revulsion. Our world is the victim of many ugly transformations, among them artificial standards in education and gradual absorption of the best technical brains by military and para-military undertakings.

What is left for us to do? Mr. Treires' solution seems inescapable, since there is really no other. The political "managers" who are subject to fierce pressures from interest groups and exposed to the arguments of expert rationalizers can hardly be expected to inaugurate changes requiring almost immediate sacrifice and loss. Mr. Treires says:

Every American must examine his own circumstances and ask whether he too is not in some respect on the military dole. Are the incomes that professionals receive based on the value of their services, or are they more persuasively explained as pay-offs for marching in step and keeping their thoughts to themselves? How many engineers, scientists and other nonmedical professionals can trace their income back to a nonmilitary source?

Time is running out. For two decades we have been able to muddle through, enjoying what used to be described proudly as "the highest standard of living in the world," while turning our eyes from the

increasing militarization and dehumanization of our society. Because the system America has drifted into retains many of the features of traditional democracy, many find it difficult to believe that the country faces a major crisis. The young are more concerned because they see what is happening.

Mr. Treires' facts come out of his background as a competent specialist, but his arrangements of them and the conclusion he reaches are his contributions as a man. He is a rare professional—one whose specialist skills do not get in the way of his seeing as a man, while they undoubtedly help to gain him an audience and earn attention for what he says. Such individuals may turn out to be among our most valuable citizens. He is not too shy to say that "a change in the hearts and minds of men" may be the only resource for a people as trapped and confined as we are by arguments based on amoral techniques and methods. The phrase, he says, has its truth:

In a very real sense, all improvements in the lot of mankind have been brought about by men who honestly examined their "hearts and minds" and acted on what they found there, rather than on the commonly held, traditional versions of reality. In short, unless a significant number of those who are beneficiaries of the war economy bestir themselves to oppose its continuance, there is little prospect for escape from the march to destruction.

Already there are tangible encouragements:

In recent years, there have been signs that many educated Americans who could quietly draw their middle-class income with no risks are voluntarily rejecting it and challenging the prerogatives not only of the government but of their own employers. Professors, priests, union officials, even businessmen have been willing to risk themselves to express personal views on matters of conscience despite the pressures of their organizations. Many professional societies have had their usually sedate annual gatherings shaken up by splinter groups which scathingly compare the pieties of their professions with the grim facts of our tightly structured society.

These may be small beginnings, but what great historical change has not sprung from persistent questionings, at first, by very few? Mr. Treires seems as much an observer of human

attitudes and moods as he is a student of economic trends:

Behind the smiling faces of the suburban fathers who believe that their only duty is to their homes and children is a growing fear. Are they in fact so concerned with nurturing and protecting their own children that they are allowing the development of a world in which no child will be safe for long? If we can see things as they are, will we not choose the more certain way of assuring a future for our children by risking something that is of passing importance—a place in the pecking order—for a world in which all children can live in peace?

## *COMMENTARY* **THE INTENT OF RELIGION**

HENRY ANDERSON'S series on "The Nature of Human Nature" makes possible a simple account of religion. So far as man is concerned, there is no reality which is not included in the conception of the Self and its Field. If we say that meaning is achieved through realization of both freedom and self-realization, then religion can be understood as symbolic projection of the means to these ends. Whatever the gods do is in illustration of the potentialities of the Self. In the philosophical religions no distinction is made between Self and Deity. There is no "relationship" to be sought. They are *one*. Both perfect and imperfect are included in divine possibility.

This is of course philosophic and psychological religion. It involves psychokinetic cosmology. It won't work as something added to a mechanistic cosmology. The cause of all lies in Mind, not in a concatenation of external forces.

No sense can be made of antique religion save by finding primary reality in consciousness and recognizing man as its expression. All nature, too, is consciousness from within, and form only from without. Man's consciousness includes self-consciousness. This is a reality given in experience, and all that Mr. Anderson says follows as a result. To be free, as he shows, means to be free to identify with forms of life which are not self-conscious and therefore unfree. Thus the radius of the self in man varies with his choices and his growth, extending to the godlike and diminishing to the bestial.

Mastery of the field is the project, conquest of illusion the goal. Seeing the Self as dwelling in everything else is the fulfillment, but this comes only through knowledge of what makes the differences in beings. The self is imprisoned by what it cannot understand. It seeks knowledge by forays of feeling and flights of abstraction. Pursued separately, these methods make only more elaborate prisons. Combined, each act of

knowing is validated by being. A man who learns by becoming stops deluding himself.

A wonderful course in this sort of learning is described in this week's *Frontiers*, telling what was found out and what delusions fell away. One could say that an "enrichment" of selfhood took place.

## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves IS IT "EDUCATION"?

THE owner of an impressively successful business remarked not long ago that he had quit hiring college graduates. They don't, he found, make as good employees as intelligent drop-outs. He told of a laundry truck driver who in a matter of weeks was able to perform tasks that are supposed to require a person with technically advanced education. This businessman has, of course, his own training program which supplies far better evidence of competence than the conventional credentials provided by the schools and colleges.

American education long ago submitted to the claim that the task of education is to prepare the young for jobs. The role is now taken for granted. In some vague way, this is regarded as being the same thing as preparing them for "life." It follows that *fundamental* reforms in education must of necessity wait on the wearing out of this fraudulent doctrine—a view which misrepresents the meaning of life and corrupts the meaning of education—but while we are waiting for these liberating realizations to dawn, certain lesser criticisms have considerable pertinence.

A book which builds a vast foundation of supporting fact under this businessman's judgment is *Education and Jobs: The Great Training Robbery* by Ivar Berg (Praeger, 1970, \$7.50). Dr. Berg is professor of sociology in the Graduate School of Business at Columbia University. He writes well on a difficult subject—analysis of statistics—and with manifestly humanist intentions. The task he undertakes is exposure of the nonsense in the new mythology of the "Knowledge Industry"—an expression he dislikes. If the reader comes to his volume without experience of the ways of statisticians, it will take considerable effort to understand what he says. We have read the book and, happily, find the jacket summary of his contentions accurate and clear:

Dr. Berg's study, based on extensive data, demolishes the conventional assumptions, point by point:

A growing number of workers have more education than they need to perform their jobs well—in some cases, more than the employers themselves regard as desirable.

Salaries are not necessarily closely related to education; many teachers and social workers, for example, earn less than plumbers and professional athletes.

An employee's productivity does not vary systematically with his years of formal education, particularly when experience is taken into account.

The rate of turnover is positively associated with high education.

Upper- and middle-class employees are not the only ones who are over-qualified for their jobs. Among workers in lower-skilled jobs, dissatisfaction was found to increase as educational levels rose.

Better-educated employees are often rated as less productive.

The practice of basing teachers' salaries on the credits they earn toward higher degrees actually encourages teachers not to teach since those who feel overtrained tend to seek administrative positions or better-paying jobs in industry. Furthermore, this practice impedes the upgrading of teacher qualifications by guaranteeing schools of education a steady supply of students, thereby relieving them of pressure to offer better courses.

In the armed forces, it was found that "high-school graduates were not uniformly and markedly superior to nongraduates" and that training on the job was more important than educational credentials.

You get a little uncomfortable reading this book, wondering who it was written *for*. This can't be helped. The "big picture" shown by statistics is put together for the people who run things, who have decisions to make, which means that the general reader can do little more than share in Dr. Berg's indignation at the stupidity of it all. As you read along, you think mournfully about the grip of the "education myth" on top administrators as well as the common folk who suppose that all this "education" is really going to make things better for everybody.

What does the book reveal? It shows, all over again, the human tendency to go by conventions instead of by realities, to prefer easily read labels to underlying facts. Personnel managers in industry, Dr. Berg found, demand college graduates because they believe that college graduates will be better workers and employees. They believe this, they don't know it. They haven't really proved it. They don't try to prove it. College graduates are reputed to have poise and self-assurance. They are supposed to subscribe to middle-class values. Most of the respondents (hiring executives) to his queries, Dr. Berg says, "made it perfectly plain that the content of a college program mattered a good deal less than the fact of successful completion of studies." The degree is regarded as "a badge of the holder's stability." As for what businessmen have found out about the *achievement* of people in relation to their education, the effort to obtain data "ended in failure." Apparently, there aren't any. Curiously, the military—both the army and the navy—has better records. Since the military takes the leavings of industry, it has to make-do, and so goes at the problem of using and developing its manpower-potential with a modicum of common sense. Its studies don't show any particular connection between educational credentials and competence on the job. Dr. Berg writes:

The military experience, which has been far more thoroughly documented than that of the so-called private sector, is substantially subversive of the prevailing ideologies that make so much of marginal increments of formal education. The results are interesting, not only because they include data bearing on relatively skilled occupational specialists, but because they are suggestive of the productive potential of a labor market in a nation in which there has been chronic unemployment and, apparently, underemployment of large numbers of men and women with allegedly deficient educational credentials.

Concluding his review of the performance of various sorts of employees of the government, Dr. Berg remarks:

The irony will not be lost on some that the nonrational use of formal credentials, which might be taken as a significant symptom of "bureau-pathology," is more likely to be found in our great

private enterprises than in our government apparatus. The capacity of industry leaders to temper the effect of the marketplace in an age of subsidies, tax shelters, stockpiling programs, depreciation allowances, and rulings that facilitate the deduction of fines and damages for price conspiracies as "ordinary business expenses" is undoubtedly related to the luxurious consumption of high-priced labor. As a consequence it is the public that shops in the competitive market so favored in economists' models. It is the public's hired managers who must act the role of the entrepreneur in imaginatively combining scarce human resources.

This is a depressing, uninspiring, yet important book—important because it confirms what some people have suspected *must* be the case. So much pretense is involved, so much preference for mere symbols of merit to the qualities which the symbols are supposed to represent.

In one place in his book Dr. Berg takes a larger view, replying to those who will say that all this emphasis on education is bound to do *some* good:

... the faith of some in the benefits of education is perhaps no more valid than others' faith in the admittedly narrow issue of economic benefit. And one may well be skeptical, if not cynical, about how much *real* education can be utilized by most industrial organizations. Meanwhile, the contention that people are changed as a function of their education and thus can change the world gains at least as much horrifying as gratifying support from history. One should note that there are as many distinguished scholars advising the Department of State on Vietnam as there are among critics of that Department, and that crackpot realism is no less prevalent among Ph.D's than among less educated members of advisory staffs in military and other governmental units. To argue that well-educated people will automatically boost efficiency, improve organizations, and so on may be to misunderstand in a fundamental way the nature of education, which functions to an important, indeed depressing, extent as a licensing agency.

It seems time to begin calling what we are doing in the name of education something else.

## *FRONTIERS*

### She Was Not "All Wrong"

EARLY in 1963, Nancy Milio, a registered nurse, conceived the idea of establishing a center for child care and health education in a ghetto area in Detroit. It took some time, and a lot of self-education for Nancy Milio, but she finally got the center going, won community support and participation, and was able eventually to leave it in good hands to go back to school and to write a book about the entire adventure. The book is *9226 Kercheval: The Storefront that Did Not Burn* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970, \$7.95), and people who are interested in actual solutions for racial problems and conflicts will miss invaluable material on this subject if they fail to read it. It must be added that what Miss Milio has to communicate can hardly be put into words, but the reader sees why. Only books like this throw light on the basically tragic situation created by the abstracting and defining faculties of the intellect—which enable us to talk with apparent clarity and even sagacity about matters we do not really understand, and thus to generate a field of spurious certainties which become stubborn obstacles to actual knowledge. Miss Milio got some actual knowledge. This becomes an inescapable fact for her readers. Knowing prose couldn't convey it, she put in a little poetry, but that doesn't convey it either.

While she was working for the Visiting Nurse Association in Detroit, she was naturally drawn to visit the neighborhood where she had lived as a little girl—now part of the black ghetto. She decided that this was where she wanted to work. This was her frame of mind at the beginning:

My naïveté at the time about the politics of living, the use of power, the force of vested interests, was immense. I believed in the efficacy of the helping professions, medicine, nursing, teaching, social work. I accepted their credos at face value, and I believed in their organizations and agencies. I thought that the aims of well-intentioned professionals were as a matter of course carried out through established institutions. Consequently, I

thought I was being fairly astute when I determined that if there was any place in Detroit where a community health nurse would get a chance to do what I wanted to try, it would be the VNA, which has the reputation of being a very stable, respectable, solvent, and charitable home health care agency, the second largest of its kind in the country. Two and a half years out of college, and I was not able to think of myself outside the category of "nurse." I was not a person with an idea and a will and a heart; I was a professional person with an idea, working within the understandable limitations of an organizational setting.

No section of this book is rich in description of Miss Milio's disillusionment. She has no time for that, and accounts of institutional and professional failure are a dime a dozen, these days. The book is entirely devoted to what *she* could do, and to the basis on which she could expect to be able to do it. As she got to know the people in the ghetto, she learned fast. None of the conventional approaches was any good. So, instead of "helping," she decided to listen and learn. She soon found she had to do it alone:

Working in the neighborhood, I tried to proselytize within the VNA as well, leading in-service education conferences, writing articles, raising questions: Why are we doing what we're doing? What are we accomplishing? Are there other ways by which we might be effective? Almost without exception I was regarded as, at worst, antiprofessional, and at best, irrelevant.

There was a respite for me in the homes of people like Vera Watkins, Johnnie West, and Mertus Butler [all women]. I had my first piece of panfried cornbread in Mrs. Watkins' kitchen, sitting on a chair without a bottom. She would describe what she had to go through to get medical care for the children. I knew Mrs. Watkins didn't need to be "motivated" or "taught"; she just needed some means of obtaining health care without having to expend heroic amounts of effort to do so.

Johnnie and Mertus said essentially the same thing. They were younger. They had dreams that spilled out of them—and a lifetime to do something about those dreams. Health was not just parental care, it touched the wholeness of their lives.

I had stopped trying to teach the meaning of health. I listened. I took notes after talking with

women like Mrs. Watkins and Johnnie and Mertus and sixty others. I tabulated the mechanical problems they would mention about getting traditional kinds of health services—time, transportation, baby sitters. I asked them what would make it easier for them.

Nancy Milio learned to cope with the psychological necessities of Black Power. Black leaders who would talk with her in private without notice of skin-color differences would brush her off in public, because they felt they *had to*.

And, the appointments they did not keep, the unanswered doorbells, the delays, were a way of dealing with "whitey," of reacting to a stereotype, in the manner that they had experienced all their lives by the white world.

In order for me to tolerate being reduced, though voluntarily, to an impotent stereotype, I had to keep reminding myself why it was happening. Why militant people were necessary to the formation of the project. Why they were militant. At that point, I did not allow myself the luxury of reacting in anger.

9226 *Kercheval* is the address of the Mom and Tots Center for day care Miss Milio established. The following account of a staff meeting in the early stages of preparation comes close to explaining why she succeeded:

One subject that should not have been voiced directly and so early in the formation of the group involved confronting black people with the meaning of being black. This was done by Mr. Hughes, a white man, at one of two early staff meetings which he attended. While I could not have stated at that time why he should not have done this, I could feel the women bristle and freeze into silence and would therefore have shifted the discussion. But the damage was quickly done, as Mertus told me later that night. The women allied me with Mr. Hughes and became suspicious of my intentions as well as his. Although in the following nine months, he was able to repair some of the damage as he met with them every week or two, he made a couple of similar errors in judgment which ultimately ended his effectiveness. . . . I too paid for being identified with the assumption that white people can help black people to attain their identity as black people, implying that we as white people have already gained our own. It is no more than a contemporary version of the white paternalism of a generation ago. Being involved in the Mom and Tots venture helped me put into words what only my

insides told me in the beginning. It is in our equivalence as human beings that we help to define each other, not as people in one category molding people in another category.

We close these notes with another of Miss Milio's secrets, as important as anything else in the book:

It was at about this time I began to realize that although I am white, I am not all wrong. Although my race is responsible for degrading other races, I do not bear the guilt alone or as an individual; I can accept my responsibility for working toward human wholeness in society out of a sense of personal conviction and worth rather than self-recrimination and guilt. On this basis I can stand in agreement or disagreement with any man, black or white, and in quietude or anger. I began to realize that as in any other relationships, but especially between black and white, infinite patience is no more conducive to wholeness than perpetual rage, expressed or hidden. Dishonest patience or tolerance is as belittling as open disdain.