

## QUESTIONS ABOUT REVOLUTION

JUDGING from recent reviews in the *Nation* of current books on revolutionary thought and the labor movement, there is both discouragement and confusion concerning the traditional radical means of changing the structure of society to an ideal form. Reducing those means to their simplest terms, Leon Trotsky declared that to make a revolution the energy of organized discontent would be necessary. Trotsky shared the social ideal of Marx and Lenin, and in Max Eastman's words, "he had enough mechanical instinct to know that the only force capable of achieving such an ideal is the organized self-interest of the masses." This was a way of saying that if you don't speak to "the masses" in terms of self-interest, they won't hear. And a revolutionist can't expect to get much going in the way of a revolutionary organization if he can't be heard.

The point of one new book—*False Promises: The Shaping of American Working-Class Consciousness* by Stanley Aronowitz—is that while self-interest may be made the basis for organization, afterward it stalls the revolution. The labor movement, this writer shows, soon lost its revolutionary potential. The reviewer, Ronald Radosh (in the *Nation* for Feb. 2), comments on Aronowitz's analysis of the history of trade unionism:

Unions, he states, have "evolved into a force for integrating the workers into the corporate capitalist system." The labor contract provides the employer with a stable and disciplined labor force. The contract establishes a grievance procedure that takes control away from the worker on the shop floor, and it becomes "the principal instrument of the class collaboration between the trade unions and the corporations." Unionism is described as an appendage of the corporations, a "vital institution in the corporate capitalist complex."

What then must happen? The worker, Aronowitz says in effect, must learn to see beyond

his immediate self-interest. Most moralists and some political thinkers would agree, but the reviewer observes:

Aronowitz gets bogged down when he fails to propose any meaningful alternatives to unionism. . . . To the coal miner who asks for an honest union that can fight to regain what had been a favorable position, Aronowitz answers that it is his responsibility to ask for the impossible. A true social movement, he argues, has to "deal with the larger question of whether or not coal mining is literally viable as a way to make a living." To the miner concerned with just that mundane problem, a demand for abolition of coal as a source of energy hardly seems feasible—let alone as a means of developing revolutionary consciousness.

Mr. Aronowitz says that workers must develop their own counter-culture and then look critically at what they are doing on their jobs. They must learn to "measure themselves as well as others by what they produce rather than by material interest." You could say that the author is not abandoning self-interest as the basis for revolution, but only putting long-term self-interest in the place of immediate wants or rewards. But no one can precisely define where self-interest loses its fiercely egocentric character, turning into feelings animated by another objective—that of public interest or the common good. Moreover, the fact is that sustained attention to historical processes is required to learn from experience that short-term self-interest makes psychological and social prisons for those willing to act on that basis alone. Actually, one may doubt that persons like Mr. Aronowitz, who write books about revolutionary ideals and objectives, are really inspired, themselves, by self-interest. It may be "hard-headed" to claim that only self-interest will arouse "the masses," but it is also a species of radical elitism: "We don't need self-interest to make us work for the Cause, but *they* do." In any event, Aronowitz seems willing to assume that

working men can now understand larger objectives as well as he can himself, since he declares for the creation of a "new working class 'public,' [that] participates in public life in accordance with self-conscious interests." He wants a Left wholly devoted to creating "a movement that prefigures a nonauthoritarian society." It seems a reasonable conclusion, despite the moral neutrality of the word "self-conscious," that very little of what we understand by ordinary self-interest would survive in such a Left.

Question: Would radicals lose their working-class audience by making such an appeal in an effort to develop "revolutionary cadres"?

Whatever would happen, Aronowitz is not alone. A long line of radical advocates have questioned exclusive emphasis on self-interest. In his book, *For All Mankind*, Léon Blum recalled to his socialist readers the vision of Jean Jaurès, the French socialist and pacifist who was assassinated at the outbreak of World War I, and said:

Do we make enough of this idealist teaching in our day-to-day propaganda? . . . Did we remember always to appeal only to the nobler sentiments of the human mind, to its inborn need of justice, affection and fraternity? It is often argued that it is useless to change social institutions until the mentality of the individual has changed, and the argument has too often been a convenient justification for the indefinite postponement of necessary changes. But have we in fact, done what lay in our power to change the individual human unit, while we tried to change society? Did we carry on the two tasks together as we should have done, so that they intermingled and supported each other?

In *Let Man Prevail*, Erich Fromm, socialist and psychoanalyst, made much the same appeal to his fellow socialists in the United States. He pointed out that the political ideas of democracy in America originally had spiritual roots, reaching back into prophetic Messianism, to the gospels, and to Enlightenment Humanism. He said that "faith in man's perfectibility within the historical process has been the most specific element of

Occidental thought," the source of the strength of the American tradition. Then he asked:

What has happened to the ideas of the perfectibility of man and of society? They have deteriorated into a flat concept of "progress," into a vision of the production of more and better *things*, rather than standing for the birth of fully alive and productive *man*. Our political concepts have today lost their spiritual roots.

Then, turning to the radical movement, he said that during the nineteenth century Socialism was "the most significant humanistic and spiritual movement in Europe and America," and asked:

What happened to socialism?

It succumbed to the spirit of capitalism which it had wanted to replace. Instead of understanding it as a movement for the liberation of man, many of its adherents and its enemies alike understood it as being exclusively a movement for the *economic* improvement of the working class. The humanistic aims of socialism were forgotten, or only paid lip service to, while, as in capitalism, all the emphasis was laid on the aims of economic gain. Just as the ideals of democracy lost their spiritual roots, the idea of socialism lost its deepest root—the prophetic-messianic faith in peace, justice and the brotherhood of man.

Thus socialism became the vehicle for the workers to gain their place *within* the capitalistic structure rather than transcending it; instead of changing capitalism, socialism was absorbed by its spirit. The failure of the socialist movement became complete when in 1914 its leaders renounced international solidarity and chose the economic and military interests of their respective countries as against the ideas of internationalism and peace which had been their program.

. . . Capitalism and a vulgarized, distorted socialism have brought man to the point where he is in danger of becoming a dehumanized automaton; he is losing his sanity and stands at the point of total self-destruction. Only full awareness of his situation and dangers, and a new vision of a life which can realize the aims of human freedom, dignity, creativity, reason, justice and solidarity can save us from almost certain decay, loss of freedom or destruction.

There is doubtless some connection between the conditions Fromm describes and the

conclusion of Todd Gitlin, in a review of Hobsbawm's *Revolutionaries* (*Nation*, Feb. 2), that today "the word 'revolution' has become a vacuity, an abstraction, the name of a historically unspecified yearning, an impulse all the more exotic for its lack of fit with the present political stasis, a slogan for commercial trends or a travesty on historical possibility." This sounds as though the word "revolution" is completely worn out and shorn of meaning. But Gitlin may find the cause of its emptiness in what he terms "the predicament which defines all 20th-century revolutionaries in the West: the problem of revolutionary consciousness without revolutionary conditions, even without a revolutionary class."

What then does it mean to talk of "revolution"? Or is this a time to stop using the term altogether? Does it make any sense to use the same word to identify widely differing doctrines of historical change or reversal? Trotsky, whose right to define "revolution" was established by historical role, believed that only "the organized self-interest of the masses" could bring it about, while Gandhi, on the other hand, whose historical role also qualifies him to speak, maintained that *sacrifice* and voluntary suffering lie at the root of revolutionary change. It seems ridiculous to ignore the difference between two such opposite views, simply because they both envision an ideal objective.

Gandhi used the word "revolution" reluctantly, perhaps because of its association with violence, but he did use it, and so has Vinoba; but both gave careful explanations of its meaning. The issue, of course, is not really one of words, but of what it is necessary to do to achieve growth and human progress, not for individuals alone, or for a favored few, but for all. In any familiar context, revolution means determined action for the common good. Gandhi, interestingly enough, looked to a "class" awakening to get things started. He said:

We cannot get Swaraj [self rule] if not one class in the country is prepared to work and sacrifice for it.

. . . Non-cooperation deals first with those sensitive classes upon which the Government has acted so successfully and who have been lured into the trap consciously or unconsciously as the school-going youths have been. When we come to think about it the sacrifice required is infinitesimal for an individual, because the whole is distributed among so many of us. . . . The secret of non-violence and non-cooperation lies in our realizing that it is through suffering that we are to attain our goal. What is the renunciation of titles, councils, law courts and schools but a measure (very slight indeed) of suffering—the hardships of a gaol life and even the final consummation on the gallows if need be. The more we suffer and the more of us suffer, the nearer we are to our cherished goal. . . .

The uneducated artisans, the women, the men in the street are taking their share in the movement. . . . The appeal to the educated classes paved the way for them. . . . The educated classes had to be put on their trial. The beginning had to be made by and through them. . . . I am all for thorough-going, radical, social reordering; but it must be an organic growth, not a violent super-imposition.

There were, of course, many differences between the goal of Indian freedom that Gandhi sought and the objective of European revolutionists. Gandhi wanted to eject the invaders of his country, while the Western radicals worked to organize a social revolution to displace the ruling government and create a socialist society. Yet Gandhi believed that genuine freedom could come only through regeneration of Indian life from within, and had declared this from the time of publication of *Hind Swaraj* in 1908.

In both cases, the change or revolution depended in part upon historical forces. The presence of the British in India aroused the spirit of revolt in the Indian people, while in Europe the exploitation of labor by capital and the inequities of the social system supplied the provocation for revolutionary struggle.

It is now a quarter of a century since the Chinese revolution, more than half a century since the Russian revolution, and almost two hundred years since the American and French revolutions. The time may have come for nurturing new

conceptions of social change, since the revolutions fired by self-interest and guided by a radical elite have left so much to be desired, even by those who still hope for change by means of the same methods. There are various signs of this hospitality to changed ways of thinking. For example, in the October-December *Newsletter* of the Western Regional Office of the War Resisters League, Roy Kepler, long an active supporter of the WRL, presents three statements on the subject of "revolution," or on the use of this word, for the consideration of WRL members. The first statement is from the educator, John Holt, who said recently:

May I suggest and urge that at least those who believe in nonviolence stop using the word, "revolution." It is unwise and self-defeating to continue to use a word which conveys to the people we are trying to win over the exact opposite of what we intend it to mean. And it unwisely encourages those who use the word to believe that the process of political change in this country which has been so painful and slow is by some miracle going to become easy and quick.

Next, Kepler quotes from a former leader in the American Communist Party, Gil Green, who has said:

Revolution has become the byword. It is on the lips of everyone in the movement; all want it; see it as the only answer; yet *few agree on what this really means*, how it is to come about, what revolutionaries must do to help "make" the revolution, and what the revolution itself is meant to achieve. . . . Revolutionary rhetoric has become a substitute for strategy and tactics and a cover-up for frustrations and failures.

Third comes the reply of Edgar Snow, the journalist and writer, when asked by Mao Tse-tung whether a revolution could be expected in the United States, and whether he, Snow, would take part in it. Snow answered (as told in *Journey to the Beginning*):

If my own country were as poor and backward as China if oppression and exploitation were as shameful and wasteful of human life, if American children were being bought and sold as slaves, if my country had always been a despotism and were now

governed by individual military satraps unchecked by any people's power, if Americans had no suffrage rights and could neither elect nor impeach, if labor had no freedom to organize or bargain collectively, if our rulers used State banks to finance their private business operations and made no accounting to the public, if the highest families in power were the richest profiteers, if foreigners held our ports and controlled large sectors of our economy, if we had lost the whole northern, eastern part of the United States without a struggle, if no legal way existed to organize political opposition—if all these things were true of the United States as they were true of China, and if there were no way to change or improve either state policies or conditions of life except by armed revolt, I would then indeed be counted in the ranks of the revolution.

Having placed these statements on the record, Roy Kepler suggested that WRL members and friends "should spend some time reviewing their rhetoric and understanding about 'revolution,' and its relevance to our times and situation." "We may," he added, "have a number of unexamined assumptions." He continued:

Is it possible to bring about desirable social transformation in the United States through carrying out a "Revolution"? What do we mean by that? On the other hand, is it possible to bring about desirable social transformation within the system in the U.S.? Are some of the institutions and practices we already have worth keeping?

Kepler adds a letter which appeared in *Newsweek*:

As a Canadian resident in the U.S., permit me to state that the exposure of the Watergate debacle is a phenomenon possible in relatively few countries. It is to the enduring credit of the U.S.'s social and political system, and of the enlightened skepticism of a handful of men 200 years ago, that the most powerful figure in the U.S. must justify himself to the governed and solicit the respect and objectivity of the fourth estate. I hope no set of circumstances will ever destroy that fragile balance.

Kepler concludes:

A society that copes with nascent fascism through its press, its courts, and its legislature can't be all bad. The WRL has the responsibility to encourage its members to consider carefully the alternatives that confront us.

Behind inquiries of this sort lies the major question of what moves human beings most effectively in the direction of desirable social change. The appeal to self-interest can arouse action of a sort, but its energy flags and dies when the interest is sufficiently satisfied. Appeal to larger, more universal goals is apparently necessary, as Mr. Aronowitz believes, but how will people whose self-interest has been fostered and stimulated for generations be able to grasp and care about such objectives? Is generating responsiveness to the common good a project that requires the resources of well-developed community concerns? A partial answer to such questions may be implicit in another contribution to the WRL/*West Newsletter*:

I was one who purchased your Kit on nonviolent education, but it does not meet any of my needs, and I doubt if it met the needs of most who bought it. I believe an understanding of Gandhi is unnecessary (if not out-dated) for peace education. As long as children are conditioned in our culture to "aggression pays off," then our way of Gandhian philosophy is irrelevant. . . . The average Joe is convinced that violence, competition, and hostility are necessary for him. Gandhi and all our fine rhetoric do not reach him. . . . If my premise is wrong, I'm open to correction, but I don't see us doing anything specific to help the seven- to twelve-year-old people solve their conflicts unless they resort to violence (actual or theatrical). The youngster's daily life reinforces violence and his family constantly praises him only if he *wins*.

This was indeed the foundation of everyday experience on which Trotsky relied in arguing for organized self-interest as "the only force capable of achieving such an ideal" as the classless society. So the problem hasn't changed very much, although the "average Joe" may have changed at least a little in his tastes and expectations.

We could take this question right back to Socrates who, looking for converts in the Athenian marketplace, argued that it is better to suffer than to do wrong, but found that few of his friends were willing to agree with him. Gandhi, however, more than two thousand years later,

found quite a few ready to practice non-violence in the way he suggested.

But that was in *India*, we say. Are the Indians, then, another species? Can they do things ordinary men can't do, or is it that we seek an excuse for not even trying? Socrates would not have made this argument. He would have said, simply, You have to decide what is right. Which makes another question: Will there be a time when what is right works better than what is wrong? If so, what must people do to bring it closer?

## *REVIEW*

### HUMANISTS ON "GOD"

THERE has not been much progress in thinking about "God" since the days of the ancient Greeks. In the fifth century B.C. Protagoras observed: "When it comes to the gods, I am unable to discover whether they are or not, or even what they are like in form. For there are many things that stand in the way of this knowledge—the obscurity of the problem and the brevity of man's life." And Epicurus, more than a century later, remarked laconically: "The gods exist, but they are not what the *hoi polloi* suppose them to be." It should be noted, of course, that these comments are on the beliefs of polytheistic religion, which gives the question some intelligibility. For if the idea of several or many gods is under consideration, the familiar attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence do not apply, so that such beings are at least conceivable. For this reason one could say that a polytheistic religion is more tenable, rationally, than a monotheistic religion, since, in the latter case, knowledge of an absolute, all-powerful, all-knowing Deity is completely impossible. Our knowledge depends upon the similarities and differences among the various objects which are known, it following that anything which is completely unique must remain unknowable.

Yet modern thinking about God has added considerable sophistication to the casual skepticism expressed by Protagoras. Three contributors to the January *Humanist*, Kai Nielsen, Arthur C. Danto, and Paul H. Beattie, provide their answers to the question, "Why We Don't Believe in God." The arguments offered are well within the comprehension of the general reader, and their logic seems (mostly) impeccable. But it is not always possible to discern the crucial issue on which the believers and nonbelievers in God contend. What is it that believers in God insist upon having as the foundation of their faith, which the unbelievers are unable to accept? What, in other words, does the God-idea

ultimately stand for, in all these contentions? The statement of a Christian advocate in this issue of the *Humanist* seems to supply an answer. In his critical response to the second *Humanist Manifesto*, recently published, Louis Dupre, who teaches religious studies at Yale, declares: "The communion of faith, at least the Christian one . . . above all . . . means that our own efforts are never the decisive factor."

This is the door to divine intervention which, after all qualifications are made, and all extenuations considered, the non-believer will not open. The issue, in short, is moral. The believer is persuaded that we cannot achieve our destiny, fulfill our lives, accomplish our salvation, by ourselves, while the non-believer asserts that we must, and that reliance on some outside power accomplishes a fatal reduction of the nature of man. On a relative scale, the situation is as A. H. Maslow said: "The worse man is, . . . the more necessary becomes a god." Or, turning the matter around, the more godlike the man, the less the (psychological) need for an extra-cosmic power to help him out of his difficulties.

This may be identified as either a pragmatic or a psychological argument, or both, and it can then be claimed that our "need" may not define reality at all. Nature is continually playing hob with what we think we "need," and it often appears that the cosmic process is totally indifferent to our "interests."

Will it help to examine the claim that the universe cannot be explained without a god who created it? We may be able to see chains of natural cause and effect, but who or what established the system and set it going? Arthur Danto (of Columbia University) shows that answers to this question do not illuminate:

Explanation is asymmetrical: If A explains B, then B does not explain A; and A, to put it pretentiously, is a mystery relative to B. If the universe is stratified in such fashion that, for each pair of adjoining strata, only one is in this sense a mystery relative to the other, the universe may be construed as ordered along explanatory lines, and

there will be one stratum which is a mystery relative to all the rest. That is to say, the universe is to be explained step-wise and upward from it, but nothing it explains then explains it. Almost exactly this structure is traditionally applied to God: He depends upon nothing, but everything depends upon Him; everything is conceived through Him but He is not to be conceived of through anything other than Himself, and so on.

In other words, works attributed to God throw no light on the nature of the Deity, for the reason that the principle of explanation can never explain itself. So, if the universe requires a Creator, that creator cannot be understood by us. The point, of course, is that none of the supposed beneficent functions of the Deity in relation to man follow from the argument from design. Mystery follows, not uplifting illumination. A concluding paragraph from Prof. Danto deserves quotation:

The concept of God is a boundary concept, the concept of a certain sort of limit. There is an irresistible propensity in human thought to treat boundaries as *amongst* the things they bound, and this always generates antinomies and seems to imply mysteries. Perhaps the thought that God is within and without the universe at once, outside as Father and inside as Son, with the Holy Spirit a logically hopeless attempt to connect these irreconcilable postures, is an illustration of the wish to have the boundaries of thought included within themselves. I cannot elaborate further upon this, but I submit it as the sort of reason that one ought not to believe in God.

This brief flirtation by Prof. Danto with the ancient metaphysical doctrine of the Logos, of the Manifest Deity in contrast to the unknowable ground or Primordial Unity or One, is of interest by reason of its being a possible solution to the difficulties of conceiving Deity as both immanent and transcendent. It is dismissed, here, probably because of the unacceptable personification involved in the Western theological tradition.

The upshot of these several examinations of the God idea in the *Humanist* is that the arguments for God, if made rigorous, end with an incomprehensible principle which is useless as a

lever in human affairs—you can't *do* anything with it; it lacks "religious utility." Conceivably, the main trouble is with the word "God" itself, which is hopelessly entangled with the imagery of personal beinghood and all the finite implications that are inevitably a part of such conceptions. Paul Beattie deals with this aspect of the question effectively, citing the account of God given by Paul Tillich as "the ground of being." Mr. Beattie, a Unitarian minister, then says:

This definition of God relates to a central tradition of Western philosophy, and also makes God an all-pervasive, unspecific "reality" that cannot be analyzed or disproved! Just as unspecific are the process definitions of God. Whitehead said, "We require God as a principle of concretion." Thus God accounts for why this world exists and not some other! This saves the concept "God" but not in a very religiously usable form. Henry Nelson Wieman is another of the process theologians who have fought valiantly to save the word "God" from oblivion. Wieman tries to be empirical by identifying God with the process of creativity. God as the creative event becomes an empirically observable process. But why call creativity "God"? Again, only for historical continuity and psychological comfort. I have no objection to using the word "God" in some new way in order to make him compatible with the scientific world view. John Dewey's definition of God as the sum total of human idealism is very appealing if one wants to use the word "God." But I feel no urge to use the word "God" in this way.

Mr. Beattie wonders a bit about the possibility that "the fundamental needs of the masses" still require the image of God, but concludes that in our day "the God postulate is not useful." "I suspect," he says, "that God language is a threat to mental clarity." It is difficult not to agree. These three essays on the subject seem involved mostly in eliminating the clouds of *non sequiturs* that afflict religious beliefs and doctrines, and the strength of the objections raised derives mainly from an exposure of the fallacies in the idea of a personal being who is also some kind of infinite cause.

The defenders of polytheism have no such problem, since they do not attempt to describe the

behavior of the Absolute—which, of course, cannot "behave" at all. The postulate of spiritual beings such as "gods" does encounter difficulties in the matter of evidence, as Protagoras noted, but there are no inherent logical contradictions—no more, that is, than there are in the idea of immortality as applied to man after death. The Buddhists; as is well known, wholly reject the personal-God idea, yet accept immortality in varying ways—the Theravada Buddhists having their view, the Mahayanaists the conviction of continuing spiritual identity—and are firmly convinced that all growth and benefit acquired come from individual effort.

The Humanist contributors to this group of articles hardly mention the idea of immortality of the soul, seeming confident that the hopes of mankind are inseparably connected with "the scientific world view," and there is little or nothing in present-day scientific knowledge to suggest either non-personal spiritual reality or the immortality of the soul. Today, however, the scientific epistemology is in process of reformation. Old notions of "objectivity" are giving way to a more philosophical understanding of both "reality" and the conception of knowledge. With the God-idea no longer a threat to independent thinking and discovery, Humanists may find it possible to consider transcendental doctrines without fear of being betrayed into submission to some arbitrary spiritual "authority." The hard-won integrity of the human spirit and mind is, after all, the most precious legacy of the scientific epoch to the human race. To recognize that this integrity can remain independent of both the personal-god idea, *and* the limiting deterministic views of a science born in the midst of a vast polemical reaction to corrupt "spirituality," would be a major step forward for humanist thinkers.

## COMMENTARY

### PIAGET'S CONTRIBUTION

IN *Who Can Be Educated?* (Grove Press, 1968), Milton Schwebel begins his chapter on the psychological determinants of educability with a discussion of the ignorance, in the United States, of the work of Jean Piaget (see "Children"). "How did it happen," he asks, "that American psychology and education largely neglected the man who more than any other has shown how the human mind grows, the stages it passes through, the structures it must develop?" Dr. Schwebel then makes this explanation:

American education's preoccupation with the fixed-ability theory inevitably shut out Piaget. When the major task is to measure and classify the intelligence of children so that they may be placed in classes appropriate to their ability, studies of how the mind develops are not necessarily enthralling. A person who believes that an inherent potential "unfolds," that there is something in each individual that with proper sunshine and water will blossom into a totally predictable kind of flower, need not concern himself with a psychologist who sees the adult, the school, the community as having a major role in what the child becomes.

While Piaget does not ignore the reality of individual aptitudes, his emphasis is on the possibilities of development, and his findings deal with what he has become convinced are the laws of mental growth. Dr. Schwebel quotes two British educators on Piaget's theories:

The ideas themselves are revolutionary in that they seek to explain the child's intellectual life in terms of his own action and its internalisation rather than as the emergence and training of an inherited ability. As Nathan Isaacs says, "we owe to him a strikingly fresh picture of the child himself as the main architect of this [intellectual] growth."

Since the fixed-ability theory of the child led quite naturally to the view that "there are no laws of learning which can be taught with confidence," the debt of modern education to Piaget seems obvious enough. Readers interested in finding out more about his work might well begin with Nathan Isaac's book, quoted above. It is *A Brief*

*Introduction to Piaget* (Agathon, 1972, \$4.95), and was reviewed in MANAS for Jan. 17, 1973. This volume includes a bibliography on Piaget and his ideas.

There may still be, and doubtless is, an "inherent potential" in every child, which "unfolds" or is limited in its expression by adverse influences; otherwise genius would be wholly without explanation; but there can hardly be conflict between this conception of individuality and the recognition of growth processes. *All* distinctively human excellence requires growth.

## CHILDREN

### . . . and Ourselves

#### ON TRUTH AS CORRESPONDENCE

A READER finds reason to object to what was said in "Children" for Jan. 30, in relation to Piaget—that the many experiments he performed with children made "his conclusions undeniable." Our correspondent, while agreeing that Piaget did "valuable work," calls attention to the criticism made by John Holt in *The Underachieving School*. After reading over what Mr. Holt says in the second chapter of this book, we did not feel compelled to retract what was written about Piaget—since this was a statement of broad generality, applying to his declaration of the need for corresponding mental "structures" at each level of cognitive learning; yet, at the same time, Holt's observations have vital pertinence to the understanding of how small children feel and think. There seems also, in this chapter, a comparative low-rating of conceptual knowledge, in contrast to the intuitive and functional knowing which lies back of all competent or excellent doing—a low-rating somewhat in the spirit of the Zen rejection of intellectual formulations.

Holt starts this chapter by noting the oversimplifications of present-day theories of learning and knowing. His point is mainly that children don't think the way adults do, that their way has its own excellences and should not be disposed of as merely "wrong." It may in some ways be better than the adult practice, which limits the idea of thinking to the manipulation of symbols. Holt says:

Many current learning theories are closely related to those of Piaget. To see the flaw in their reasoning, we must look at one of Piaget's simpler experiments. Before a young child he put two rods of equal length, their ends lined up, and then asked the child which was longer, or whether they were the same length. The child would say that they were the same. Then Piaget moved a rod, so that their ends were no longer in line, and asked the question again. This time the child would always say that one or another of the rods was longer. From this Piaget

concluded that the child thought that one rod had become longer, and thence, that children below a certain age were incapable of understanding the idea of conservation of length. But what Piaget failed to understand or imagine was that the child's understanding of the question and his own might not be the same. What does a little child understand the word "longer" to mean? It means *The one that sticks out*. Only after considerable experience does he realize that "Which is longer?" really means, "If you line them up at one end, which one sticks out past the other?" The *meaning* of the question, "Which is longer?", like the meaning of many questions, lies in the procedure you must follow to answer it; if you don't know the procedure you don't know the meaning of the question.

Well, you could say that the "misunderstanding" by the child is natural enough, since the general concept of "longer" and "shorter" is not yet a structure of the child's mind. "The one that sticks out" as the meaning of "longer" is an idea different in kind from the general notion of "greater than" or "smaller than." It is indeed an idea of an image, not of a relationship. It is not really conceptual—which could be taken to be Piaget's point. Yet perhaps, for Holt's criticism, this explanation is beside *his* point. He continues:

I have often thought: If little children really believed about conservation what Piaget says they believe, how would their knowledge lead them to act? To make any good thing—a collection of toys, a piece of candy or cake, a glass of juice—look like more, the child would divide it spread it about. But they don't break the candy in little bits and pour their juice into many glasses; if anything, they tend to do the opposite, gather things together into a big lump. I also asked myself, what kinds of experience might make a child aware of conservation in liquids? How would you learn that, given some liquid to drink, whatever you put it in, you got only the same amount to drink? Well, you might learn if liquid was scarce, and every swallow counted, and was counted and relished. So I was not surprised to hear that, when someone tried the liquid conservation problem in one of the desert countries of Africa, the children caught on at a much earlier age. As they say, it figured. Finally there are some very important respects in which all children do grasp the principle of conservation, and this long before they talk well

enough to learn it through words. We are told little children are fooled by their senses because they have no words to make an invariant world with. But the world they see, like the world we see, is one in which every object changes its size, shape and position relative to other objects. It is a world of rubber. But even by the time they are four, or three, or younger still children know that this rubber world they see is not what the real world is like. They know their mother doesn't shrink as she moves away from them. And this is a far more subtle understanding than the ones Piaget and others like to test.

So far as we can see, John Holt is here making a defense of childhood—a defense at more than one level. First, he is defending the child's way of responding to the world as being both natural and good, appropriate to childhood, and in a deep way good from any point of view, in its spontaneity and authenticity. Second, he is defending childhood against adult insistence that children hurry up and learn to think like adults—which may be a way that is full of self-deceptions and false readings. A little later he says:

Sometimes children give wrong answers because they have not understood a particular question. Most of the time the trouble lies deeper. It isn't just that they now and then give an answer to a wrong problem, but that the answers they give are rarely related to *any* problem.

After a while, to satisfy the parent's or teacher's avarice for "answers," the child may resort to invention, or even wild guesses—"or deliberately wrong ones, thrown out in the hope of evading the issue." But initially, it seems certain, the child isn't really "problem-oriented" in the way adults are. He is not engaged in building the logical explanatory structures that the parent regards as knowledge, but has his own vital, playful-serious way of experiencing and learning about the world. His way isn't "cognitive" in the adult sense, and it will never be entirely cognitive, if the child grows up in mental health, although cognitive learning will become an important part of his growth to maturity.

Holt is here making an informed and appealing brief for the natural psychological

metabolism of small children; he wants people to recognize that this phase of human development has its unique importance for the human being who is in process of growing up; and he wants them to study it, see how it works, try to understand it, and then to give it time and space enough to have a natural flowering.

Who knows with certainty "how a child thinks"? Even great experts, apparently, can make mistakes. But persons who watch and listen may see much more than others who are filled with preconceptions and "oughts" about child behavior. It is in showing the reader this that Holt makes his great contribution. If, as a result of reading him, people learn to *listen* to children, delight in them as they are, and notice their ways of growth, then Mr. Holt will have accomplished a great deal. It is at least possible to achieve some progress in this direction, as his comparative certainties in a number of relationships make clear.

This discussion leaves unsettled the question of the intrinsic importance of cognitive learning and conceptual structures, which Holt thinks are over-valued in our society. He says: "From this fundamental error—the idea that our understanding of reality is fundamentally verbal or symbolic, and that thinking, certainly in its highest form, is the manipulation of these symbols—flow many other errors, and not just in the classroom."

For an example of understanding which isn't verbal he suggests a baseball player who knows more than physical theorists about where a fly ball is going to come down, since he will get under it and catch it. . . . Well, yes. But John Holt, using symbols, writes a book, perhaps better than any baseball player could write, and there is an interesting mix of intuitive insight and verbal or logical communication in his book, the latter making a friendly matrix for the former. Actually, people able to conceptualize but poorly—who are, as we say, "all heart"—almost always lack in range of awareness and perception. The radius of feeling and awareness—the scope of the *being* sort of knowledge—seems to be well served by

certain excellences of conceptual understanding. Conceptualization can be regarded as a sort of mental ladder or bridge that human beings need to build consciously, in order to get to the top of a situation, or to the "other side," where, they find, another kind of perception—direct identification with what is to be known—becomes possible. Concepts, in short, are maps, and maps can be good or bad. So Holt's comments on Piaget may be recognized as a critical evaluation of the correspondence theory of truth, since identification with the object of knowing is direct and unambiguous, while correspondence through conceptualization is only a constructed reflection of this immediate sort of knowing.

Yet conceptualization seems to be required for self-critical knowing. It has its embarrassments, since it involves uncertainty and error, but it also allows us to examine the accuracy of our thinking. Could there be dialogue without conceptual knowledge? Going a bit further, can conceptual understanding *induce* direct intuitive perception? The answer to this last may be a tentative yes, to be immediately followed by pointing out that concepts may also *hide* reality from us, and hide it most of all when the possibility of direct perception through identification is denied. . . . A pursuit of this question, which has many pitfalls, could go on and on.

## *FRONTIERS*

### From Shadowed Walls

MUSING on the contents of a modest booklet which arrived recently from Canada—*Words from Inside*, the poetry, essays, drawings and pictured sculpture by men in Canadian prisons—we began wondering if the universal, yet limited, appeal of "folk" expressions could be understood in the same way as the hopes and longings of the "chorus" in ancient dramas. Did the chorus speak with the voice of mankind?

Well, the encyclopedia articles on the subject don't help much, since they trace the Greek chorus to Bacchic dancers who in time gave birth to dithyrambic poetry, celebrating the mysteries of Dionysus. Only memories of random reading in old plays support our view, which is that the chorus spokesman would often say, "Ah, yes, that's how it goes." As an English street song echoes: "It's the sime the whole world over / It's the poor what gets the blime / And the rich gets all the gravy / Ain't it all a bleeding shime!"

The opening essay in *Words from Inside*, by Frank Guiney, "Poetry in Prison," describes the "old prison poetry" typified by rhymes lamenting the fickle sweethearts of men in jail:

. . . a story of hope and good intentions and resolutions and love and longing and broken promises; of clinging desperately to a bit of solidity in a sea of loneliness; of predicating your whole life on faith in another. It's a story of rose-coloured glasses, and starry eyes shining through wire mesh screen, eyes alight with the often mistaken optimism that love conquers all. And it's the grinding, frustrating, soul-killing story of the frailty of the human condition when the inexorable, debilitating crush of time tests its slender underpinnings.

It's a story of bitterness and tears and insanity; of slashed wrists and hanging bodies; of broken dreams and broken men; of a shrunken world of helplessness and despair, three paces long and an arm-stretch width.

It's an unwritten story directed to other prisoners in other five-by-tens in other endless nights.

It was a limited verse for a limited audience, which only prisoners would understand. Frank Guiney says that some of the prisoners of today are realizing that they can speak to "people unfamiliar with the prison ethic," and they want to. For a while they did, but the penal press in Canada "got a little big for its britches," and was abolished after ten years of increasingly boisterous life. Yet men in Canadian jails still write poetry, some of them gaining publication in this booklet, issued by the Prison Arts Foundation, 143 Fifth Avenue, Brantford, Ontario, Canada.

What is poetry by men in prison like? Naturally, it's like poetry written by men outside. Yet this verse does seem to show the edge of a sympathy which grows in pared-down people. Is this nuance, vignette, or *haiku*, by Norman Poole?

every good pool player needs  
a small town to leave behind.  
a graveyard where flowers  
smother weeds.

a hamburger joint where 1955  
Chevy Forever blares from the  
juke-box.  
a movie theatre where kids  
smoke in the back while Bogart  
sneers.

at the edge of town a grain  
elevator stands like a silent  
sentry guarding the entrance to  
elsewhere.

Not *haiku*, no doubt. Too much explanation, but just right, just the same.

A poem by Frank Guiney, called "Slim Pickins," has the old mood and a little of the new. There are more stanzas in this one than we have space for, but Slim can be identified from just a few:

He slips into alleyways  
Where drunkards sometimes lie  
He finds 'em by the shadowed walls  
Where drunkards sometimes die

Old Wino in a doorway,  
Crumpled, lifeless heap;  
Slim finally got you,  
And you sold out pretty cheap

. . . He's an icy wind on Hastings Street;  
 He's a shadow in the rain;  
 He's a slug in a jug of Baysie Rum;  
 He's a thought in a fevered brain.

He's the shabby hope in a cap of dope  
 He's a love that withered and died;  
 He's oblivion bought, if you don't get caught:  
 He's goddamit-to-hell I tried. . . .

He's the sordid gloom of a two-bit room;  
 And you can feel Him waiting near;  
 A piece of the night, just out of sight;  
 A gut full of nameless fear.

And just before the mornin' grey  
 Pre-empt's the night-time sky,  
 It just may be that you (or me)  
 Have found a place to die.

An anonymous fragment says in a few words  
 what all folk expressions cry out, again and again:

See that guy  
 over there?  
 That's me.  
 If you don't  
 believe me,  
 go and ask him.  
 But don't be surprised  
 if he says  
 he's you.