

THE NEXT STAGE OF EVOLUTION

IF we go back far enough in history, or off in the wilds somewhere—beyond the reach of newspapers and radio—we soon realize that life in such remote regions is very different from our own. There the things to be understood and dealt with are the circumstances and forces of nature. Education is a matter of finding out about the growing season, the water supply, and protection from weather. Our situation, in contrast, is in an advanced society. The realities of a frontier existence are all taken care of by others. Reading about them has an academic quality. Agriculture is now pursued, we are told, by about four per cent of the population, and if matters concerned with what you don't do and are not about to do are academic, then many of the laws of nature belong to that class of fact. They are good to know, if you want a "well-rounded education," but the practical problems of everyday life—food, clothing, and shelter—are all in the hands of trained experts on whom we rely. We may find some fault with the experts, and reformers may propose that we take back some of the functions they perform (in order to have a more "natural" life), but meanwhile we find it necessary to deal with questions and problems of another sort. The currency of our everyday lives is not intelligence about nature, but *words*.

Today our chief means of learning about the facts of life are words. Our contact with the realities of existence is not direct. We are told in words what the issues are. Teachers in schools inform us. The press instructs us. The government admonishes us through statutes and regulations. Critics, who read more than most people, summarize, analyze, and suggest. Words, oral and written, put us in touch with the world we live in, and we respond, according to our lights, with words. Our decisions, that is, in all but matters of personal relations, are made by balancing one abstraction against another. We depend very little on first hand knowledge.

In *Irrational Man*, a book published more than thirty years ago, William Barrett made this characterization of modern life.

Technology is one material incarnation of rationalism, since it derives from science; bureaucracy is another, since it aims at the rational control and ordering of social life; and the two—technology and bureaucracy—have come more and more to rule our lives. . . . the abstractness of life in this technological and bureaucratic age is now indeed something to reckon with. The last gigantic step forward in the spread of technologism has been the development of mass art and mass media of communication: the machine no longer fabricates only material products, it also makes minds. Millions of people live by the stereotypes of mass art, the most virulent form of abstractness, and their capacity for any kind of human reality is fast disappearing. If here and there in the lonely crowd (discovered by Kierkegaard long before David Riesman) a face is lit by a human gleam, it quickly goes vacant again in the hypnotized stare at the TV screen. When an eclipse of the moon was televised some years ago, E. B. White wrote in *The New Yorker* that he felt some drastic turning point in history had arrived: people could have seen the real thing by looking out of their windows, but instead they preferred looking at the *refection* of it on the screen. Kierkegaard condemned the abstractness of his time, calling it an Age of Reflection, but what he seems chiefly to have had in mind was the abstractness of the professorial intellectual, seeing not real life but the reflection of it in his own mind. We, however, have fabricated for our time a new kind of abstractness, on a mass scale; through our extraordinary mastery of technique we provide a ready-made reflection in place of the real, and not for university dons but for the millions. Our journey into untruth has gone farther than Kierkegaard could have imagined.

He is right, of course. We have indeed wandered—or been conducted—far from natural reality. But we cannot conclude that abstractions are in themselves bad. Knowledge is abstract. The generalizations which collect knowledge from experience are abstractions. There would be no *homo faber*—man as builder—without the principles

we have abstracted from experience in the form of science. Philosophic truth is abstract, and so is any other kind of truth. A truth is a statement which adds to our capacity to live our lives intelligently, and it is generically abstract—about the nature of things.

Reason makes abstractions, it makes them by reaching conclusions, and conclusions, in order to have the aim of utility, are about some things but not about others. So the abstraction is always a partial truth. The whole truth cannot be put into words, although people have been trying to do it for thousands of years: theology is an example. Reason sheds abstractions wherever it goes, and they are good or bad abstractions depending upon what people do with them. As William Barrett says:

To be rational is not the same as to be reasonable. In my time I have heard the most hair-raising and crazy things from very rational men, advanced in a perfectly rational way; no insight or feelings had been used to check the reasoning at any point. Nowadays, we accept in our public and political life the most humanly unreasonable behavior, provided it wears a rational mask, and speaks in officialese, which is the rhetoric of rationality itself. Witness the recent announcement that science had been able to perfect a "clean" hydrogen bomb—to be sure, not perfectly "clean" yet, but "95 per cent clean" or even "96 per cent clean." Of course the quantitative measurement makes the matter sound so scientific and rational that people no longer bother to ask themselves the human meaning of the whole thing. No doubt, they tell themselves, there must be a perfectly rational chain of arguments which, starting from the premise that there must be hydrogen bombs, leads to the conclusion that there must be "clean" hydrogen bombs—otherwise war itself would become impossible!

The logic of the proposition is that clean bombs are better—even more "humane"—because they have no, or less, lethal fallout. The statement is true, but has meaning only in the framework of the assumption, as Barrett says, that "there must be hydrogen bombs."

We are now back to the importance of words. Clean, as the ads in *Good Housekeeping* make plain, is *good*. Cleanliness, indeed, is next to Godliness, and much less difficult to attain. So, if you want to persuade someone of something, you choose

words—the abstractions—which link your conclusion with what your hearer believes is good. A clean bomb is a *good* bomb. And so on. Again, as William Barrett says, "A perfect rationality might not even be incompatible with psychosis—it might, indeed, lead to the latter."

Accordingly, words make the jungle, the untamed wilderness of experience that has taken the place of the forces of nature, in our time. We are all surrounded by countless visible and hidden persuaders, many of them highly skilled in the employment of words. In the old days, when the sciences of our time were young, if a Galileo proposed an abstraction, then a Newton, or someone else, would repeat the Italian's experiment to test its validity. There was still some strong connection between the world and our knowledge of the world. It is good, of course, to have truthful and careful scientists, but in science you are not supposed to take anyone's word for what he claims to have found out. You either authenticate the claim yourself or demonstrate its falsity. The scientific method is intended to bind knowledge to reality or immediate experience. But science accepts only the testimony of the senses, and most of the abstractions we are now confronted with, in verbal form, go beyond this comfortably objective area. Moreover most of the science of the present is so complicated, requiring not only knowledge of higher mathematics, but also elaborate and expensive instruments, that, if you want to test some contemporary scientific proposition or claim, you might have to spend half your life learning how to do it. And there are endless tests to be made. As one eminent scientist declared some forty years ago, "Except for our specialty, we all belong to the masses."

A large part of our problem, then, is that we have to trust the words of the people who claim to explain things to us. What if they are not reliable? We know from experience that not very many people are reliable, and numerous good books are filled with accounts of our collective mistakes—mistakes made mostly from listening to people who are not reliable or are just plain wrong. That, you could say, is the present human situation. There seems very little that we can do to change it, except by going partway

"back to nature" and making up our own minds in at least a few respects. This might also be a way of enhancing our intuitive recognition of truth.

For the most part, however, we shall continue to be dependent upon what people say. How do you tell an accurate reporter from a careless one? How do you distinguish an honest opinion from somebody else's party line? Is there a way of recognizing the difference between concern for the truth and determination to win an argument?

These questions are hard to answer. A great many people have stopped trying to answer them, and just hope against likelihood that the person they are listening to can be depended upon, and that his mistakes, if he makes them, will be honest and his own. The newspapers seem more hardheaded. While they may consider issues on their merits on the editorial page, the lion's share of space goes to accounts of the power struggle between contestants for office. Not who is right, but who's ahead, and why, is the issue. Analysis of the expertise in mounting a campaign is deemed more interesting to readers than any principles that may be at stake. The gladiatorial exploits of the political manipulators of words will sell more papers.

Another form of the basic question would be: How do you tell a teacher from a propagandist? Again, it isn't easy, since both use persuasion. The best way to begin in looking for an answer may be to examine the arts of persuasion. The name for these arts is Rhetoric. In *Therapeia*, a book which puts the Platonic philosophy in present-day language, Robert E. Cushman devotes a long section to persuasion, both as used by Socrates and by the Sophists of Athens. Telling a Socrates from a Sophist, again, is not easy. Many of the Athenians saw no difference between them, calling Socrates a sophist along with all the rest. But the difference was great, as Mr. Cushman shows. First, how did the sophists operate? He says:

The incentives prompting the practice of rhetoric were readily apparent and openly acknowledged by its teachers. Rhetorical skill was the best means of winning the verdict in public debate and securing the kind of support necessary for the furtherance of private interest or party cause. . . .

[Plato] could not view with indifference the claim of Corgias that the wily disputer, however ignorant of the truth, was quite able to subvert it and make a sorry spectacle of the truly informed specialist who happened to be inferior in forensic skill. He could not regard as true art a sleight-of-hand which was able to make the same thing appear to the same persons as being at one time just and at another unjust. Such practices were, plainly, traffic in untruth, and the practitioner was a merchandiser in appearance. Truth was manifestly subordinated to the will and purposes of the disputant. . . . Whether it was the speech of Lysias, as in the *Phaedrus*, or that of a Solon or a Pericles, the orator began with a presumed truth or an unexamined and antecedently adopted thesis. He proceeded to support and enforce it, never to appraise its validity. His whole intent was in contriving by every persuasive trick at his command to get others to share, for some ulterior reason, the opinions he promoted. How, except by some incredible good fortune, could one expect truth to emerge concerning affairs either small or great?

What were the methods the Sophists used?

In the *Phaedrus* Plato went to the trouble, though with obvious satirical intent, of enumerating the various types of "proof" which the Sophists contrived for public debate. These were: narrative, testimony, confirmation from probabilities, and refutation, "covert allusion" and "indirect praises"; the proper uses of figure and metaphor; "tearful speeches" and techniques for arousing pity and fear. There were also forms of speech by which a Thrasymachus could arouse assemblies to wrath, then soothe again. But in every case the device necessary above all others was to indicate adroitly in what respect the proposition to be enforced coincided with the opinions and prejudices of the assembled group.

Rhetoric was obviously a form of "flattery," and that is how Plato regularly described it. In the effort to win his case, says Socrates in the *Gorgias*, the rhetorician always appealed to the predilections of his audience and dangled before it what was most pleasant to hear. In this sense Plato says the function of rhetoric is to persuade the multitude. And by the multitude he means the appetitive *dunamis* in human nature which constitutes the "main mass of the soul," the part insatiably bent upon pleasure. Thus rhetoric is discredited in so far as its method of producing persuasion is by accommodating argument to the ingrained prejudices, unexamined opinions, and unchallenged commitments of minds largely

controlled by clamorous desires rather than by a love of truth.

Finally, rhetoric, as practiced, stands condemned when measured by the results it obtains. It may successfully inculcate beliefs, but in so doing it accomplishes only a transfer of one man's opinions to another man's mind.

How, in contrast, will a teacher, a pursuer of truth, proceed? The tools of his art may be similar—he, too, will use narrative, testimony, and allusion—but his goal is quite different. He is interested, not in establishing a belief, but in examining it for its validity. He, too, may draw on the same traditional sources as the Sophist, but his intent is not to convert but to stimulate investigation. In all education, Plato has one fundamental assumption: that human nature is a mixture of the true and the false and that true opinion needs to be separated from bias and freed from misconception. This, once accomplished, becomes the basis for more serious investigation. But the inquirer must *want* to overcome his prejudices, be willing to find himself wrong, and then to make himself right. And the teacher does not pretend to know anything he is ignorant of. The Socratic goal is to go back of true opinion to the first principles of the question, which then allows the inquirer to see his own way clear. Socratic education relies upon the inner integrity of the learner. The teacher does not seek to lead him in any direction save to this intimate consultation with the best of himself.

The teacher interrogates. The learner makes replies without circumvention or defensiveness as answers commend themselves. Goodwill toward the advancement of the inquiry is required on the part of both the questioner and the one who answers. . . . Socrates knows full well that condescension or feigned commitments to the inquiry at the start will inevitably rob the investigation of its fruits in sincere conviction at the end. But he also understands this other important fact: When a man's real and honest opinions are offered as the grist of joint-discussion, it is not his casual statements which are brought to the test, but the person himself. For Socrates confesses, "although my first object is to test the argument, the result will be that both I, the questioner and my respondent are brought to the test." This, of course, is what is required to lay bare the contradiction which Plato believes exists in the mind of a Polus or a

Callicles—the contradiction between their professions and their profounder beliefs.

With remarkable psychological insight, Plato (or perhaps Socrates) discerned that all argument is trifling and all demonstration is superficial which does not really involve the person of the investigator, his essential mind and genuine convictions, true or false. The accomplished rhetorician leaves men spectators of his virtuosity and legerdemain; and, even if he wins conviction by his dexterity, those who "believe" are usually hesitant to admit that his contentions are their own. . . .

When, however, men honestly submit to the examination of opinions and find, upon analysis and comparison, that they actually hold contradictory judgments about the same things, as Polus did about doing wrong and suffering it, then, as said in the *Sophist*, they "grow angry with themselves and gentle toward others." Therewith, they are ripe for the apprehension of truth, and *elenchos* [question and answer] may have its fruition in deeper insights.

Who, then, are the people we need to listen to—whose words, whatever they are, at the outset at least, we can trust? They are the Socratic sort of people, who don't want to convert anyone to anything, whose interest is in helping people to know for themselves. They ask about the nature of truth, and the ways of finding it, and never try to tell you what it is.

This seems to be a period of history when the needs and animating motives of the past no longer have priority. We don't need any empire builders. We don't need explorers and colonizers. We don't need a lot of scientific discoveries and innovations in engineering and construction. We don't need faster, better, wider systems of transportation or communication. We don't need more "media," whether for the spread of information or for entertainment. What we do need is to learn the scope and limitation of concepts and the uses and misuses of words. This layer of our being—what we think with, how we make up our minds, the way we choose what we give our heart and faith to—seems rudimentary and undeveloped, in need of training and deliberate exercise. It is the area of self-initiated growth, far from popular these days, but surely the next stage of evolution for man.

REVIEW

A MARTIAL VIRTUE

NOEL PERRIN'S *Giving up the Gun* (Godine, 1979, \$8.95) is a delight to the reader, whatever his reason for picking it up. The book is the story of how the Japanese, late in the sixteenth century, decided to do without firearms both in their domestic quarrels and for national defense. Only the canonical persuasions of Commodore Perry, presented in 1854, were able to change their minds once again, and then, having become wholly convinced that guns were now a necessity, they made themselves equal in armament to the other "great" nations of the world in about twenty-five years.

What is to be concluded from this almost miraculous capacity for cultural transformation? Noting its title, a pacifist might rush out to purchase Perrin's book, on the theory that if a humane rejection of wholesale slaughter could make the Japanese abandon firearms, other nations might learn from their example. But it wasn't, alas, humanity that caused the Japanese policy-makers to close down the shops of their gunsmiths. It was martial dignity and pride. This book in effect invites the pacifist to consider that whatever human beings do, if a heroic reason for doing it is given the highest priority, things may work out better for all.

Mr. Perrin's point, however, is somewhat different. He is intent on showing that you *can* "turn the clock back." Their going without guns, pistols and cannon for two hundred years in no way interrupted the good life of the Japanese. The author offers this impressive refutation to the fatalists of modern progress who believe that it is "just not possible to reverse technology within a continuous culture."

They see the choice as either continued progress in all fields, or else a return to the Dark Ages. Either we press on with neutron bombs and biogenetic engineering, or we give up dentistry and window glass. Selective control of technology is impossible, they suppose.

The history of Tokugawa Japan does not support this gloomy view, however. The Japanese did practice selective control. They utterly ceased weapons development—indeed, went backwards—and meanwhile they went ahead in dozens of other fields. Slowly, to be sure. Technological change occurred much more gradually in seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth century Japan than in the West. It may even have occurred at a rate better suited to the human mind. There was no future shock in Tokugawa Japan. But it did occur. Japan was neither decadent nor stagnant. Obviously there were decadent elements and stagnant pockets—but there are in most societies at most times. Take the country as a whole, and one finds health and vitality.

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What the Japanese experience *does* prove is two things. First, that a no-growth economy is perfectly compatible with prosperous and civilized life. And second, that human beings are less the passive victims of their own knowledge and skills than most men in the West suppose. "You can't stop progress," people commonly say. Or in a formulation scientists are especially fond of, "What man can do, man will do." Once he learns how to alter the DNA code, the theory goes, it is inevitable that he *will* alter it. Once the technology exists for supertankers, there is no going back to small tankers, much less sailing ships. If computers in the year 2001 are more efficient than men at doing most of the processes lumped together under the term "thinking," then computers will do most of the thinking.

This is to talk as if progress—however one defines that elusive concept—were something semidivine, an inexorable force outside human control. And, of course, it isn't. It is something we can guide, and direct, and even stop. Men can choose to remember; they can also choose to forget.

The Japanese, who were skilled metal workers, learned about guns from some Portuguese traders in 1543, and thirty-two years later, in 1575, a local lord won a battle because he had armed ten thousand of his men with matchlocks. For the next few years, "firearms were at their height in Japan." Japanese gunmakers vastly improved the crude Portuguese mechanisms and introduced devices to keep their powder dry on rainy days.

Why did they give up such efficient instruments for killing the enemy? During the half-century occupied in the perfection of these weapons, resistance to their use was developing among the most influential people in the country—the warrior aristocrats, or Samurai. Mr. Perrin explains:

It [the resistance] arose from the discovery that efficient weapons tend to overshadow the men who use them. Prior to Nagashino [the decisive battle won with guns in 1575], the normal Japanese battle had consisted of a very large number of single combats and small melees. After introducing themselves (unless they were gunners), people paired off. Such a battle could produce almost as many heroic stories as there were participants. It even had a kind of morality, since each man's fate depended principally on his own ability and state of training. . . .

Firearms were obviously putting an end to a great tradition:

Bravery was actually a disadvantage if you were charging against guns, while if you changed sides and became a matchlockman yourself, there was still not much chance for individual distinction. You were now simply one of the thousand men in your rank, waiting behind your breastworks to mow down the charging enemy. It didn't take much skill to do this. Skill had been moved back from the soldier to the manufacturer of his weapon, and up from the soldier to his commander. . . . It was a shock to everyone to find that a farmer with a gun could kill the toughest Samurai so readily.

There was no formal prohibition of firearms in Japan. The people—the men who did the fighting—just decided against using a weapon that would consign their swords to museums. Japanese swords were the best in the world; they were symbols of manhood and nearly every other kind of excellence in Japanese culture. Samurai dignity and taste triumphed and, after some years, guns were practically forgotten. The Tokugawa Shogun in 1607 made the distribution of guns a government monopoly, which established control over the gunsmiths, who received fewer and fewer orders. As the firearm business decreased the smiths went back to making swords.

Toward the middle of the seventeenth century, there was one last battle in Japan in which guns played a serious part. This was the Shimabara Rebellion in 1637. It was the last gasp of Christianity. It occurred twenty years after the expulsion of the missionaries and one year after the country had been closed to all Europeans except the handful of Dutchmen in Hirado, and a few remaining Portuguese traders, now confined to the tiny island in Nagasaki harbor. . . . This was the last time the Japanese used guns with any readiness for over two hundred years. The samurai went back to taking fencing lessons, the monks resumed making black-feathered arrows, and all over Japan skilled smiths poured out a never-ending stream of top quality armor and swords.

So the Japanese were not exactly pacifists who gave up guns because they wanted to do no harm. In the fifteenth century they were the world's leading exporters of arms. In 1483, 67,000 swords were shipped to China alone. Mr. Perrin relates:

A Japanese sword blade is about the sharpest thing there is. It is designed to cut through tempered steel, and it can. Tolerably thick nails don't even make an interesting challenge. . . . The distinguished twentieth-century arms collector George Cameron Stone once took part in a test in which a sixteenth-century Japanese sword was used to cut a modern European sword in two. And there exists in Japan right now a film showing a machine-gun barrel being sliced in half by a sword from the forge of the great fifteenth-century maker, Kanemoto. If this seems improbable, one must remember that smiths like Kanemoto hammered and folded and rehammered, day after day, until a sword blade contained something like four million layers of finely forged steel. (Or rather, until the *edge* of the blade did. The rest was of much softer steel. A whole blade like the edge would be as brittle as glass, and shatter at the first blow.)

Along with their skill in making swords, the Japanese were fine architects. A Jesuit who visited their country said of a new-built castle (in 1569) that "among all the palaces and houses which I have seen in Portugal, India, and Japan, I never yet saw anything comparable to this in freshness, elegance, sumptuousness, and cleanliness." Japan in the sixteenth century had a

population of twenty-five million, greater than any European country. There were five universities maintained by the Buddhists, the smallest of them larger than either Oxford or Cambridge at that time. The literacy rate in Japan was higher than anywhere else in the world. They were also devoted to the arts. When a court noble was questioned by a military governor, who was preparing to torture his prisoner, the victim asked for paper and ink but composed, instead of his confession, a poem:

*It is beyond belief!
I am questioned not on the art of poetry
But on the things of this transient world!*

Impressed, the tough samurai governor let the noble go.

The first operation with anesthesia was done in 1805 by a Japanese surgeon, before ether had come into use in the West. The record of the high civilization of these sword-lovers goes on and on. After Perry opened up the country to American visitors, a Boston scientist found that the death rate in Tokyo was lower than that of Boston, that diseases like typhoid were wholly absent because the Japanese were so far ahead of the rest of the world in sanitary engineering. The roads were better than those in New England. "Funny little Orientals with swords weren't supposed to have roads like that."

Other visitors recorded their surprise at finding such things as operating oil wells at Echigo which had been brought in thirty years before the first American oil wells, recycling so efficient that there was simply no debris to be found in Japan, and a merchant marine (composed entirely of sailing ships between fifty and two hundred tons) larger than most Western countries.

Who needs guns? The Japanese would have been quite happy to go on doing without guns, if we had been willing to let them. And they might then have been far better off today, since with their return to guns they adopted so many other mistakes of the West.

COMMENTARY
AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

IN this week's "Children" Ivan Illich is quoted on what happens to college students. They have lost, he says, "the faculty for hearing the difference between the desiccated utterance of standard television English and the living speech of the unschooled."

A hundred years ago, in his *Confession*, Tolstoy reached a similar conclusion:

What happened with me was that the life of our circle,—of the rich and the learned,—not only disgusted me, but even lost all its meaning. All our acts, reflections, sciences, arts,—all that appeared to me in a new light. I saw that all that was mere pampering of the new appetites, and that no meaning could be found in it, but the life of all the working masses, of all humanity, which created life, presented itself to me in its real significance. I saw that that was life itself and that the meaning given to this life was truth, and I accepted it. . . . The conviction that the knowledge of the truth could be found only through life incited me to doubt the correctness of my life; but what saved me was that I managed to tear myself away from exclusiveness and to see the real life of the working people and to understand that that alone was the real life. I saw that if I wanted to comprehend life and its meaning, I must live, not the life of a parasite, but the real life, and accept the meaning which real humanity has given to it and, blending with that life, verify it.

There are some ironies to be considered. Tolstoy had a good education; so did Ivan Illich. If you have ever heard Illich speak, even if only for a few moments on some radio program, you know that he is an exquisitely cultivated man. He may not have acquired this quality in the schools he went to, but he got it *somewhere*. He found a focus—or created it himself—for the acquirement of a living culture. He doesn't ever mention this during his campaigns for deschooling society, nor does he refer to this process—indispensable to balanced performers—in his appeal for restoration of a "vernacular" life. But, like Tolstoy, he started a "school"—a counter-cultural school—working with Valentina Borremans, in Cuernavaca. And

like Tolstoy, he began to write books—another sort of schooling focus. And just as countless people used such foci to go to school to Tolstoy, others attend Illich's informal school by reading his books. In short, the *principle* of a school—as a systems analyst might say—is indispensable. It is the practice which needs correction. Perhaps, some day, Illich will write a book to make this distinction.

CHILDREN ... and Ourselves

ABOLISHING DOUBLE IGNORANCE

IT is difficult to review Ivan Illich without palpitating one's conscience. We have found it necessary to read him about three times in order to get his point, and how can you possibly do such material justice in a brief review? He looks at the same world we do, but he sees things in perspectives that seldom occur to the rest of us. Take for example his article (an extract from a forthcoming book), in *Teachers College Record*, Fall 1979, titled "Vernacular Values and Education." These forty-five pages turn out to be a celebration of "Vernacular Values" in depth:

Vernacular comes from an Indo-Germanic root that implies "rootedness" and "abode." *Vernaculum* as a Latin word was used for whatever was homebred, homespun, homegrown, homemade, as opposed to what was obtained in formal exchange. The child of one's slave and of one's wife, the donkey born of one's own beast, were vernacular beings, as was the staple that came from the garden or the commons. If Karl Polanyi had adverted to this fact, he might have used the term in the meaning accepted by the ancient Romans: sustenance derived from reciprocity patterns imbedded in every aspect of life, as distinguished from sustenance that comes from exchange or from vertical distribution.

Vernacular was used in this general sense from preclassical times down to the technical formulations found in the Codex of Theodosius. It was Varro who picked the term to introduce the same distinction in language. For him, *vernacular speech* is made up of the words and patterns grown on the speaker's own ground, as opposed to what is grown elsewhere and then transported. And since Varro's authority was widely recognized, his definition stuck.

By now you suspect that Illich means to revive the old meaning of vernacular. He doesn't like "authorities." He thinks they distort the lives of people by telling them what to think and do. Authorities lack the organic endorsement of vernacular. What they say doesn't grow in life from the ground up, but is an artificial graft from the outside. The more authorities around, the

weaker and more dependent the people who listen to them. So, Illich says:

Vernacular came into English in the one restricted sense to which Varro had confined its meaning. Just now, I would like to resuscitate some of its old breadth. We need a simple, straightforward word to designate the activities of people when they are not motivated by thoughts of exchange, a word that denotes autonomous, non-market-related actions through which people satisfy everyday needs—the actions that by their very nature escape bureaucratic control, satisfying needs to which, in the very process, they give specific shape. Vernacular seems a good old word for this purpose, and should be acceptable to many contemporaries.

Illich is mainly concerned with exposing the subverters of vernacular—the people who go about telling you that what comes naturally must be replaced with what authorities teach. There was a grammarian named Nebrija who set out to talk Queen Isabella of Spain into obliging everyone in the country to write in an *authorized* version of Castilian Spanish. He composed a grammar for this purpose, arguing that if only this *proper* writing were used in Spain, then Isabella could direct the minds of her subjects into approved channels. The "junk" vernacular books of the day—they came out all the time and were very popular—would lose their market because they were not in the standardized tongue. A born authoritarian moralist, Nebrija appealed to the monarch:

Your Majesty, it has been my constant desire to see our nation become great and to provide the men of my tongue with books worthy of their leisure. Presently, they waste their time on novels and fancy stories full of lies.

Nebrija was worried about the ineffectual thought control of the time.

Manuscripts could sometimes be extirpated by the roots. Not so books. Even with the small editions of two hundred to less than a thousand copies—typical for the first generation of print—it would never be possible to confiscate an entire run. Printed books called for the exercise of censorship through an *Index of Forbidden Books*. Books could only be proscribed, not destroyed. But Nebrija's proposal

appeared more than fifty years before the *Index* was published in 1559. And he wishes to achieve control over the printed word on a much deeper level than what the Church attempted. He wants to replace the people's vernacular by the grammarian's language. . . . By this monopoly over an official and taught language, he proposes to suppress wild, untaught vernacular reading. . . . Nebrija clearly showed the way to prevent the free and anarchic development of printing technology, and exactly how to transform it into the evolving national state's instrument of bureaucratic control.

The next major offender is Comenius, the "great" educator who announced that:

Education begins in the womb, and does not end until death. Whatever is worth knowing is worth teaching by a special method appropriate to the subject. The preferred world is the one so organized that it functions as a school for all. Only if learning is the result of teaching can individuals be raised to the fullness of their humanity.

All those professionals are now almost completely in charge, and Illich is making his declaration of independence of them.

Traditional cultures subsisted on sunshine, which was captured mostly through agriculture. The hoe, the ditch, the yoke, were basic means to harness the sun. Large sails or waterwheels were known, but rare. These cultures that lived mostly on the sun subsisted basically on vernacular values. In such societies, tools were essentially the prolongation of arms, fingers, and legs. There was no need for the production of power in centralized plants and its distant distribution to clients. Equally, in these essentially sun-powered cultures, there was no need for language production. Language was drawn by each one from the cultural environment, learned from the encounter with people whom the learner could smell and touch, love or hate. The vernacular spread just as most things and services were shared, namely, by multiple forms of mutual reciprocity, rather than clientage to the appointed teacher or professional. Just as fuel was not delivered, so the vernacular was never taught. Taught tongues did exist, but they were rare, as rare as sails and mills. In most cultures, we know that speech resulted from conversation embedded in everyday life, from listening to fights and lullabies, gossip, stories, and dreams. Even today, the majority of people in poor countries learn all their language skills without any paid tutorship, without any attempt whatsoever to teach them how to

speak. And they learn to speak in a way that nowhere compares with the self-conscious, self-important, colorless mumbling that, after a long stay in villages in South America and Southeast Asia, always shocks me when I visit an American college. I feel sorrow for those students whom education has made tone deaf; they have lost the faculty for hearing the difference between the desiccated utterance of standard television English and the living speech of the unschooled.

Plato (in the *Phaedrus*) put practically the same comment in the mouth of the Egyptian Ammon, who reproached Theuth for inventing writing. The people, he said, would be fooled into thinking they know something when they don't.

What then shall we do? Tear down the colleges, abolish the schools? No, but let them decline and gradually disappear, as people recover the sense of what learning means and what it is for. Meanwhile they can't do without substitutes. Called for is a new definition of learning. Tolstoy said it well: Education must bring *equality*, which means making people independent of teachers. Learning, however accomplished, enables the learner to manage his own life. Otherwise it is a fraud, an imposture, and an enslavement. It doesn't matter whether the culture is "advanced" or otherwise. The problem today is how to put all those experts in their place. If they are really good experts and know their stuff, they'll begin to do it themselves. If not, we'll get along without them very well.

Meanwhile, we are glad that Ivan Illich is so well educated, no matter how he managed it, in spite of a lot of time spent in school! The really good men always turn even the defects and mistakes of their culture into avenues of growth. And *that* is the real art of learning; again as Plato put it—the overcoming of double ignorance.

FRONTIERS A Social Restoration

WHEN we read, we like to read about what a man or a woman has done. The story of some kind of hero makes the best book. The pageantry of the setting or environment has its charm, but the accomplishments of people—how they cope with expected and unexpected difficulties—is what holds our attention. Description of the world and its circumstances has its importance, but only to provide stage and scenery. The circumstances, after all, go on forever—in both time and space—while we, here and now, are doing as well as we can with what is close by. The more distant claims less and less attention, and what is outside the range of our awareness gets no attention at all.

But when formerly remote circumstances become oppressive, the individual who proves better at dealing with them than the rest of us gains an audience. It is close to exciting to learn what Scott Nearing did with a piece of misused land in Vermont, and how Malcolm Wells designs houses that burrow in the earth, how John Todd developed a dwelling that combines subsistence with shelter, and about inventive individuals across the country who have focused sun and wind to solve practical problems. These people show how to relate to the resources of the environment in constructive and self-reliant ways. They demonstrate that interdependence and cooperation with nature are actually principles of independence in life.

But there are obstacles—the sort of obstacles described by Albert Jay Nock in *Our Enemy, the State*, and by Robert Engler in *The Brotherhood of Oil*. As individuals we can only do so much. While learning how to cope with the physical environment is well within our reach, the social environment has made the natural world practically inaccessible to a great many people. There is this thing called the System—a stubborn, lethargic, and indifferent sort of environment—

which, while said to be our own creation, is also out of our hands. And today the System seems to be doing practically everything wrong.

What can be done about this? The traditional remedy for a bad and oppressive System is Revolution. We had our revolution and declared ourselves free. But the trouble with revolutions is that they have become impossibly expensive to repeat. And revolutions, however well-meaning at the start, have no way of establishing the means to keep them going in the right direction. This bothered Thomas Jefferson, and until he saw the ugly aftermath of the revolution in France, he thought we might profit by having one about every twenty years.

In *On Revolution* Hannah Arendt suggested that Jefferson "knew, however dimly, that the Revolution, while it had given freedom to the people, had failed to provide a space where this freedom could be exercised."

Only the representatives of the people, not the people themselves, had an opportunity to engage in those activities of "expressing, discussing and deciding" which in a positive sense are the activities of freedom. And since the state and federal governments, the proudest results of revolution, through sheer weight of their proper business were bound to overshadow in political importance the townships and their meeting halls—until what Emerson still considered to be "the unit of the republic" and "the school of the people" in political matters had withered away—one might even come to the conclusion that there was less opportunity for the exercise of public freedom and the enjoyment of public happiness in the republic of the United States than there had existed in the colonies of British America. Lewis Mumford recently pointed out how the political importance of the township was never grasped by the founders, and that the failure to incorporate it into either the federal or state constitutions was "one of the tragic oversights of post-revolutionary political development." Only Jefferson among the founders had a clear premonition of this tragedy, for his greatest fear was indeed lest "the abstract political system of democracy lacked concrete organs."

It was as Benjamin Rush had declared—although "all power is derived from the people,

they possess it only on the days of the elections. After this it is the property of their rulers." Who are these rulers? The simple answer is best The rulers are the people whose enterprises filled the power vacuum within a system of democracy which lacked concrete organs. What could be more natural, or even inevitable?

Which brings us to the importance of James Ridgeway's *Energy-Efficient Community Planning* (JG Press, Box 351, Emmaus, Pa. 18049, paper \$9.95). While the title is accurate enough, this book is really about how to re-establish "schools of the people" in the towns and cities of the United States. The author begins .:

It is now clear that the oil shortages of 1973 were but the first signal in a protracted energy crisis. Six years later, in the spring of 1979, the crisis deepened with the near catastrophe at Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania and with the long lines at the gasoline pumps. OPEC price rises in summer exacerbated the crisis.

Since the Arab boycott of 1973, three successive administrations—those of Nixon, Ford, and Carter—have struggled with the energy question. None of them have achieved any real progress. Congress, for its part, has been intractable and generally unresponsive to public demands for change.

But in the last six years there have been substantial changes in the way American towns and cities use energy. While these changes are seldom noticed, they combine to make the beginnings of what could well become a national energy policy. This book is about such communities and their local energy programs.

All too often, changing the nation's energy policy is perceived as merely increasing domestic oil production, mandating the compact car, halting nuclear power, and so on. Yet an effective energy policy need not be only a national one. Rather, various parts of the nation can adopt the innovations that suit their needs.

Instead of reading only about unusual individuals, it is now possible to study the achievements of exemplary towns. Seattle, Washington, for example, "has turned away from nuclear power and announced its intention of making up the energy to have been provided by

the two power plants through conservation," with promise of decentralization through alternative technology in energy production. Davis, California, has a new building code designed to obtain maximum benefit from the sun, and there are bike lanes all around town, with 28,000 bicycles already in use. Northglenn, in Colorado, has adopted a water conservation policy that serves agriculture instead of mining, and Hartford, Connecticut, has established local truck gardens to reduce the price of food (no costly transport). Other towns are developing power from windmills, fuel from wood, energy from waste. The back of the book has chapters on housing, national energy planning, the transition to solar energy, and includes a check list for action by people who want to involve their communities in deliberate change.

This is not quite a collection of hero stories, but it offers good reading about towns that know what they want. In these communities, the town meeting is back at work.