

## THE BLESSINGS OF INEFFICIENCY

THERE are times when one cannot help but be favorably impressed by the defeat of the experts. Take for example the complex mess of the failure of the nuclear power installation at Three Mile Island. To help people to understand how so awful a thing could happen in our advanced society, one of the commissioners of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Service, Victor Gillinsky, wrote in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* for last January:

The size of nuclear plants increased so rapidly in the early 1970s that designers and operators outran their experience base. Government safety reviewers were thrown off balance by the large number of license applications for these new, increasingly complex plants. The size and sophistication of the construction projects taxed some utilities beyond reasonable limits. To make matters worse, the government failed to develop a firm approach to waste disposal and allowed uncertainty about radioactive spent fuel to run in circles for 20 years, one scheme replacing another without resolution.

Let us be duly grateful. Were it not for these imperfections in the designers, operators, promoters, and bureaucrats of nuclear power, their Faustian dreams might have seemed to come true, and we should have to wait for disaster on a much larger scale to give the country pause. There are times when a "confusion of tongues" is a good thing, putting a stop to wild and unnatural expectations. The utopian temper is probably too deeply rooted for reformers to abolish, and, moreover, we could not get rid of it without ceasing to be human. For this reason, then, thanks are due to nature for shattering projects that violate unknown and unconsidered laws. The curbing of the *hubris* of the technological imagination is not something that engineers seem capable of, and in a technological age ordinary people are fearful of contradicting the experts on whom they so much depend.

Yet the case for Utopia stands; how could we face life without dreams, and how could we live without trying to realize them? The best statement of this case, in modern times, that we know of, was made by Arthur Morgan in *Nowhere Was Somewhere* (Chapel Hill, 1946). Morgan had the almost unique capacity to combine imagination and vision with common sense. At the end of a chapter on the uses of Utopias, he said:

The efforts of statesmen to put their plans into practical effect often are blocked by lack of a great pattern which they can follow. In the aggregate men have a vast amount of energy, but possess small capacity for creative design. They spend their energies in wars, in building economic empire, in ostentation of wealth, because no finer design for living possesses their spirits. Whenever an apparently hopeful design is powerfully presented so as to capture men's attention and loyalty, they will pour vast energies into its realization, even though the design is extremely faulty. Witness the designs presented by Buddha, Mohammed, Rousseau, Karl Marx, Mary Baker Eddy, Joseph Smith of the Mormons, and Adolph Hitler.

No greater service can be done to men than to contribute to the correction, refinement, and enlargement of the designs of life they live by. Efforts to do this by means of pictures of ideal societies, called utopias, rank high among effective means to that end. It is not the immediate application of such a picture to a particular society that is the measure of their greatest usefulness, but the fact that they exist as bases for measuring what has been done and as suggestions of what might be.

This statement can be accepted in its entirety, so long as we recognize and admit that faulty utopian designs need both criticism and opposition, lest they be carried too far. Counter-utopian thinking may be of two sorts. Most counter-utopian thinking is competitive utopian thinking. Against the mechanistic vision of a nuclear-powered material paradise, for example, is set the Gandhian conception of a collection of

village communities where the people are skilled in intermediate technologies and are self-governing and self-reliant in habit and intent. Communitarian critics point out that the nuclear-powered society would have to be some sort of garrison state. This view seems virtually confirmed by some of the experts themselves. As Victor Gillinsky remarks, the price of nuclear power is living with dangerous high technologies, and some of these dangers, according to John P. Holdren, are so severe "that a significant chance of even one occurrence may be judged too high a price for society to pay." The other kind of counter-utopian thinking seems more far-reaching. It proposes that the utopians ignore a basic reality about human societies, since they conceive of their ideal society as a glorious "unity" in which all learn to work and be happy together. But the fact is that *no* society of any dimension is without built-in conflict. To dispel this illusion of unity, Ortega wrote at the end of his sociology, *Man and People*:

. . . public power always supposes behind it an opinion that is really public, hence monolithic and exercising the full compulsion of an observance. When this is not so, instead of public opinion we find only the private opinion of groups, which generally coagulate into two great conglomerates of opinion. When this happens, the society splits, divides, or separates, and then public power ceases to be such, it breaks up or splits into parties. This is the hour of revolution and civil war.

But these maximum dissensions are only the superlative of a fact that is present in every society, that is inseparable from it: namely, the antisocial character of many individuals—the murderer, the thief, the traitor, the self-willed man, the man of violence. This is enough to make us realize that giving the name of "society" to a collectivity is a euphemism that falsifies our vision of collective "life." So-called "society" is never what the name promises. It is always at the same time, to one or another degree, *dis-society*, repulsion between individuals. Since on the other hand it claims to be the opposite, we must radically open ourselves to the conviction that society is a reality that is *constitutively* sick, defective—strictly, it is a never-ending struggle between its genuinely social elements and behaviors and its dissociative or antisocial

elements and behaviors. For a minimum of sociability to predominate and *eo ipso* for any society to endure as such, it must frequently summon its internal "public power" to intervene in violent form and even—when the society develops and ceases to be primitive—to create a special body charged with making that power function in irresistible form. This is what is commonly called the State.

Conventional utopias ignore this constitutional sickness of societies in order to be persuasive. It is for this reason that, as Morgan says, their best use is "not the immediate application of such a picture to a particular society," but as measures, or even metaphors, of what might be. Hence fanciful or mythical utopias may be the most useful, from a human point of view. They do not represent actual human good, but allegories of the good, provoking the imagination. While we may be much affected by these allegories, their influence is largely subconscious since they appeal very little to people of a practical turn of mind. Practical thinking about the future, of the kind we do, is always material and collectivist. We want a tangible, historical realization of the good society, and this means that we focus on technical and material development, promising widely diffused affluence. The growth and balance of individual humans is not considered, first, because it is not defined in social terms, second, because we don't know how to measure it; and third, because growth in inward character is mysterious. We assume that if external conditions are right, good humans will result. This became the major contention of the Enlightenment, in its final, vulgarized phase, and it is essentially materialist and collectivist in theory.

It is one thing to conceive of society as an imperfect vehicle in which real human development takes place, not because the vehicle has been greatly improved, but because it has been prevented from standing in the way of the subtle processes of character formation. It is quite another to suppose that "society" is responsible for producing good human beings, and therefore

must itself be made perfect first. The fallacy in this assumption has been well put by Karl Popper:

. . . it must be one of the first principles of rational politics that we cannot make heaven on earth. The development of communism illustrates the terrible danger of the attempt. It has often been tried, but it has always led to the establishment of something like hell. Those who are inspired by this heavenly vision of an angelic society are bound to be disappointed, and when disappointed, they try to blame their failure on scapegoats, on human devils who maliciously prevent the coming of the millennium, and have to be exterminated. . . . Communism has reintroduced slavery, terror, and torture; and this we must not condone and cannot forgive. Yet we must not forget that all this happened because the founders of communism believed in a theory which promised freedom—freedom for all mankind. We must not forget in this bitter conflict that even this worst evil of our time was born out of a desire to do good.

One could say that a great many risky programs are made to seem both good and necessary by stubbornly collectivist thinking. Material progress, for example, is one of the things that is ruthlessly insisted on. Without ever more power, the collectivist engineers say, modern man will be reduced to the cave man's existence and be deprived of all the better things of life. But this is nonsense. As Macneile Dixon remarked in *The Human Situation*: "Motors are a very recent invention, and you cannot assert them a necessity of civilized life. Till a few years ago the world did very well without them." There is a vital range of thinking which the technological and collectivist outlook ignores, as noted by Dixon in these Gifford Lectures, 1935-37:

Science has worked wonders in our time, and may be confidently expected to work still greater wonders. The Utopian architects, as might have been anticipated, have turned to her genius for assistance and encouragement. If science be permitted to take matters in hand no bounds can be set, Professor Haldane assures us, to human progress. Diseases will, of course, be banished. Men, he predicts "will be able to think like Newton, to write like Racine, to paint like the Van Eyks, to compose like Bach. They will be as incapable of hatred as St. Francis." Man's life will probably be measured by thousands of years,

"and every moment of his life will be lived with the passion of a lover or discoverer." One can see it will all be very wonderful. Professor Haldane is a man of science, the grand manner of the prophets sits well upon him, and I have no kind of claim to challenge his forecast of what science can perform. It may be that the Professor Haldanes of the future will be able to manufacture any kind of men to order, cynics or saints, chess-players or engineers, poets epic or lyrical, or any brand of humorist, philosopher, Adonis, or Admirable Crichton to suit the requirements of society. And what more could you want? Well, shall we say, for one thing, justice, a small matter which this programme does not include?

Curiously, now that the molecular biologists, by fussing with people's genes, seem much closer to the possibility of affecting our heredity, the claims of what they might be able to do are much reduced from the heights to which Lord Haldane took them. And educators of today entertain grave doubts as to whether college graduates of our time will be able to think as well as the graduates of fifty years ago, to say nothing of Newton and Racine. In short, the scientists no longer really want to be put in charge, except for a few arrogant die-hards, and the people are by no means ready to increase their power.

Happily, Nature has a way of slowing down such wildly Faustian enterprises. She seems able to either destroy or show the irrelevance of their wonderful "efficiency," as in the case of the Green Revolution.

From a human point of view, efficiency—or more efficiency—in statecraft might prove to be about the worst sort of progress we could experience, when you consider the various projects acceptable to the heads of states and their tough-minded advisers. We may well wish them failure and a little humility, if not a lot, in years to come. Other peoples have learned this lesson in the past. Consider the life of the people of Burma during the nineteenth century, as described by an Englishman who lived among them. They knew quite well the blessings of inefficiency. In *The Soul of a People* (1898), Fielding Hall related:

It is a Burmese proverb that officials are one of the five great enemies of mankind, and there was, I think (at all events in the latter days of the kingdom), good reason to remember it. . . . It may be asked why the Burmese people remained quiet under such a rule as this; why they did not rise and destroy it, raising a new one in its place, how it was that such a state of corruption lasted for a year, let alone for many years?

And the answer is this: However bad the government may have been, it had the qualities of its defects. If it did not do much to help the people, it did little to hinder them. To a great extent it left them alone to manage their own affairs in their own way. . . . The Burmese government left its people alone; that was one great virtue. And again, any government, however good, however bad, is but a small factor in the life of a people; it comes far below many other things in importance. A short rainfall for a year is more disastrous than a mad king; a plague is worse than fifty grasping governors; social rotteness is incomparably more dangerous than the rottenest government.

And in Burma it was . . . only the management of state affairs that was feeble and corrupt, all the rest was very good. The land laws, the self-government, the social condition of the people, were admirable. It was so good that the rotten central government made but little difference to the people, and it would probably have lasted for a long while if not attacked from outside.

The attackers, of course, were the British, who were then by contrast quite efficient. Annexing Burma was, Fielding Hall remarks briefly, "a political necessity for us." And then he says:

The central government of a country is, as I have said, not a matter of much importance. It has very little influence in the evolution of the soul of a people. It is always a great deal worse than the people themselves—a hundred years behind them in civilization, a thousand years behind them in morality. Men will do in the name of government acts which, if performed in a private capacity, would cover them with shame before men, and would land them in gaol or worse. The name of government is a cloak for the worst passions of manhood. It is not an interesting study, the government of mankind.

There is much more of interest in this remarkable book, but we leave off quotation to emphasize what the author says about government

and its irrelevance to actual human development. The real point here is that we have been mistaking government for ourselves. This is the collectivist delusion. It is also an Aristotelian fallacy. Aristotle thought that belonging to a state exhausts the possibilities of a human being.

Fortunately, there is a kind of spontaneous cultural or community wisdom which often defeats the invasions of the specialists and the rationalist system-makers. In *Earthwalk* (Anchor, 1974), Philip Slater quotes a letter from one of his graduate students, a Moroccan who decided to try to do some "research" in the old Arab city where he lived. The student told how he went about it and what happened:

I went to the public telephone [in the post office] which is not an automatic one. I gave my list of numbers to the operator who happens to have known me since ages. He wanted to know why I want to call all these people. I explained briefly that I was doing a sort of sociological survey. He wanted more details. I told him that it will take us about an hour, and that by then the post office will have to close. He took it as an insult and asked me to wait until he called me. I did. He called me to say that the numbers were either busy or not answering, and that I should not try to monopolize a public phone by calling so many people. I then told him I was sorry I was so worried about the time, and that I was ready to tell him what I was doing. I did. He wanted to know how can 10 or 20 people, very special and particular, be representative of hundreds and thousands, who only have some things in common with them. So I proceeded to explain "*la theorie de la probabilité*." He then disagreed and rejected the theory as being junk. I told him that it was his right to reject it, that that was the normal destiny of a theory—some accept it and some reject it. He did not like my attitude and said I was avoiding discussing the matter with him, because I think in my head that he is not worth discussing with because he did not have my chance to carry on his studies and ended up doing a stupid job, etc. I tried to convince him of the opposite. It took me two more sessions and three days to get to use the phone.

The graduate student's "research" was really slowed down! Slater muses:

A traditional culture is full of distractions. One cannot deal impersonally with the environment, or follow out an internal program in the mechanical, linear way we are used to doing in the West. One is caught in an intricate web of ties that pull one back and demand an examination of how every new act relates with everything else. Relationships are primary, taking precedence over the pursuit of knowledge or personal achievement.

The ecological problems we face today are not possible so long as this kind of thinking persists; the absorption in interrelationships prevents one from even contemplating the kind of mechanical response that leads to ecological imbalances. One is not allowed to postpone (indefinitely) dealing with "social" or "human" consequences of some narcissistic pursuit.

Americans delight in the ease with which they can get things done, but we owe it all to the simple device of having abolished every social mechanism for weighing actions in advance. This is done largely through absolutistic slogans like free enterprise, scientific freedom, freedom of choice, and so on. These slogans have been marketed so successfully that most civilized peoples confronted daily with the disastrous consequences of the removal of social balancing mechanisms, feel that the price is worth paying.

Well, the Arabs may be mixed up in some ways, and they seem to be causing us a lot of grief. But the stubbornness of their traditions has a bright side. Just imagine how much trouble they are saving themselves, and us, and the rest of the world, by not being as "efficient" as we are!

## *REVIEW*

### A FINE GANDHI BOOK

JOURNALISTS with talent and flair often write very good books, mainly for the reason that, having this ability, they are in a position to write about what really interests them. Ability is thus an ingredient of independence, and it is credit to the journalistic profession that the best of its practitioners commonly use their independence for the general good. Such journalists are not scribblers who write only to make money, but men and women animated by a substantial element of *noblesse oblige*. They deserve both admiration and respect. A lot of people would like to do good, but don't know how; these journalists do it as part of their way of life.

These are thoughts inspired by a reading of William L. Shirer's new book—*Gandhi, a Memoir* (Simon and Schuster, \$12.95), an account of the time spent by Shirer with Gandhi during crucial phases of his career. The story of Gandhi's labors is filled out, so that the book becomes a good introduction to understanding Gandhi's impact on history—better, perhaps, than large volumes of detailed biography. Other accomplished journalists have written similar books—one thinks of Vincent Sheehan's *Lead Kindly Light* and Louis Fischer's *A Week with Gandhi* and his *Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. These men wrote about Gandhi because they were drawn to him; they sensed somehow, what he stood for and would eventually be recognized as standing for in the world. They kept their critical faculties alert; they wrote, not as worshippers, but with an experienced objectivity; but they all agreed on the incomparable stature of the man. Two other books should be mentioned here—Edmond Taylor's *Richer by Asia*, which illustrates the transforming power of the East on an American soldier in India, and *Gandhi's Truth* by Erik Erikson, an eminent psychoanalyst who found himself both awed and moved by Gandhi, and who would not, like some conventional Freudians, attempt to explain him away. These books inform

about Gandhi and they illustrate how the leaven of moral greatness works its way into the fabric of civilization.

Here we are concerned with Mr. Shirer's book. Shirer first met Gandhi in 1931, during one of the interludes when he was out of jail, and when the British were beginning to realize that they were having to cope with a force they didn't understand. Gandhi talked to Shirer, apparently liked him, and the reporter was able to gain access to the Indian leader ever after, when he needed to. Toward the end of 1931 Gandhi went to England as representative of the Indian National Congress, ostensibly to bargain with the British about the terms of a new Indian Constitution, but actually to declare India's uncompromising demand for independence. Shirer saw him in England at that time—during the good days and the bad ones. And he kept in touch with him for the rest of Gandhi's life. In his introduction, he records the deep and ineradicable impression Gandhi made on him:

I watched this man, a saintly, Christlike figure, walk upon this earth, in flesh and blood, at a moment when he had launched his great civil-disobedience movement that began to undermine the British hold on India and that, in the end, freed his country from two and a half centuries of British rule. It was one of the great accomplishments of history and for him a personal triumph such as our world has seldom seen.

But there were, in a deeper sense, even greater triumphs for this unique man who was unlike any great individual of our time, and perhaps of any time. He liberated India from a foreign yoke, but he also liberated the whole world from some of its encrusted prejudices and foolish ways of life. He was one of history's great teachers, not only by the example of his life but by what he preached and practiced. As such, he was, as Viscount Louis Mountbatten, the last British Viceroy of India, said of him on his martyred death akin to Buddha and to Christ.

In a harsh, cynical, violent and materialist world he taught and showed that love and truth and non-violence, ideas and ideals, could be of tremendous force—greater sometimes than guns and bombs and bayonets—in achieving a little justice, decency, peace, and freedom for the vast masses of suffering,

downtrodden men and women who eke out an existence on this inhospitable planet.

Obviously, we should pay attention to a man like that; and to a writer who writes like that.

What did Gandhi think about his great "victory"? He was sad and disheartened that India's freedom had come at the price of a divided country—the separation into the Moslem state of Pakistan and Hindu India. The Congress accepted the price as a necessary compromise, but Gandhi would not, could not, accept it, and one might call him broken-hearted save that no earthly disaster could really break Gandhi's spirit. Shirer tells about that time:

For more than a quarter of a century the Congress had never questioned Gandhi's leadership, which had, after all brought India to the threshold of independence. Now, at last, it had not only been questioned but rejected. The aging leader felt his isolation.

"I find myself alone," he told an aide. "Even Patel and Nehru think I'm wrong. . . . They wonder if I have not deteriorated with age. Maybe they are right and I alone am floundering in darkness."

When, at the stroke of midnight on August 14, 1947, Prime Minister Nehru in Delhi proclaimed India independent and the celebrations began throughout the land Gandhi, in faraway Calcutta, slept. The next day he spent mostly in prayer. He made no public statement of any kind.

Only on his seventy-eighth birthday, six weeks later, did he give vent to his feelings. He had been, as usual, besieged by birthday greetings, but this time he was also hailed as the man who had liberated his country.

"Where do congratulations come in?" he asked. "Would it not be more appropriate to send condolences? . . . There was a time when whatever I said, the masses followed. Today, mine is a lonely voice." . . .

He had not much longer to live.

Gandhi would compromise where principle permitted, but he would not agree that the political division of India was necessary to settle the "communal" problem. Moslems and Hindus had gotten along together before the British came,

and they could do so after they left. Their failure to do so in 1947 made Gandhi sick at heart, feeling that he had failed. They were now murdering each other in many cities of India. He fasted once more, and a last-minute settlement saved his life, already hanging by a thread. And then his Hindu enemies, who blamed him for the partition and the slaughter of Hindus by Moslems, accomplished his death. "Since he had not died, they decided to kill him."

Shirer writes:

I too felt the darkness.

But not for long. The light that Mahatma Gandhi shed on this earth was too strong and penetrating to go out with his death. It will shine, I believe, for centuries to come. It will continue to illumine my own life to the end.

This book tells how the stature of Gandhi grew in Shirer's eyes. The drama, for him, began with the Gandhi-Irwin Pact in 1931, which seemed to many Indians filled with concessions to the British, who regarded the agreement as merely "an end to a temporarily troublesome situation." The British, Shirer says, "had no inkling of the depth of the Indian revolution which Gandhi was unleashing nor of how it was being kindled by a resurgent Indian nationalism." Gandhi then assured the skeptical American journalist that India would be free, and in his lifetime. "You cannot hold down much longer three hundred and fifty million people who are determined to be free. You will see!"

Gandhi invited Shirer to accompany him on one of his morning walks, which began at five o'clock in the morning, and Shirer stayed up all night to keep the appointment. They sauntered through tiny villages where foreigners were seldom seen. "You will never get to know the real India," Gandhi told him, "until you get out of Delhi, Bombay and the other cities and see how the overwhelming mass of Indians, half starved and in rags, pass their lives in their wretched huts in half a million villages, toiling from dawn to dark

in the nearby sunparched fields to wrest a little food from a worn-out soil."

When Gandhi came to Delhi to confer with Lord Irwin, the population of the region rose to greet him.

The great crowds all over India that came on their own to hail Gandhi were unorganized and therefore sometimes disorderly, milling about in their excitement at merely being in the presence of the Mahatma. The Germans I saw in the Nazi time were deeply moved by the masterful oratory of Hitler. Gandhi was not an orator. He scarcely raised his voice and made no gestures. I doubt if the vast majority in the huge crowds I saw ever caught his words. They were fulfilled by the sight of him and especially by receiving his *darshan*. This puzzled me at first, and still does in memory. I witnessed the phenomenon; I cannot say that I fully understood it. The Indians, even the lowest, illiterate peasant seemed to do so instinctively. They felt in the presence of the great man that something immense was suddenly happening in their drab lives, that this saintly man in his loin cloth cared about them, understood their wretched plight and somehow had the power, even in the face of the rule of the great white sahibs in Delhi and the provincial capitals, to do something about it.

Shirer asked an Indian college teacher how he would explain such enormous crowds.

"You see," he said, in almost impeccable English, "well, you see, it's really quite simple. For these masses Gandhi holds out the only light, the only hope there is. They want to see the man who, they're told, goes around half naked like themselves and yet who dares to present their grievances to the mighty, bemedaled white Viceroy himself.

"And it's all the more remarkable because"—he paused—"I don't know whether you realize it, but you've been traveling most of the way through Rajputana, which is made up almost exclusively of princely states. There are nineteen of them, you know, all autocracies ruled by maharajahs and nawabs. The people in these crowds see in Gandhi, first of all, a deliverer from the misrule of these damned princes. They may be ignorant, but they are not stupid. They know that these petty tyrants, once the British, who protect them, are gone, will be finished."

Thank heaven for the Gandhi books, especially Mr. Shirer's, which gets you into the grain of a great man's life, making it possible to begin to understand the meaning, the reality, of moral power.

**COMMENTARY**  
**THE CROSSBOW STAGE**

EDMOND TAYLOR'S *Richer by Asia* (Houghton Mifflin, 1947), mentioned in this week's Review, is a book to go back to again and again. While the passages on Gandhi are brief, they are a searching part of this remarkable response of an intelligent American to the East during a time of great turmoil. His book has many passages like this one:

My contact with the followers of Gandhi, all deeply religious even when unbelieving, had awakened me to still another cultural significance of religion. These Indian revolutionaries had impressed me as human personalities, they seemed deeper, more significant, and possessed of a greater capacity for passion than we. The more I reflected upon this the more I was inclined to emphasize in my mind the "bessemerizing" effect of religion—the way in which it tempered and hardened the individual personality in a given cultural mold—for it seemed to me that our own forefathers, living in an age when religion was an intense cultural reality, had differed from our present Western selves in much the same way as the new Indians do.

The decline of religion in the democratic societies of the West has produced an age of worthy pasteurized personalities, of amiable, meager passions . . . . Our minds have become more adult, but our emotional natures have become childish and our moral values tend toward the infantilism of naughty and nice as polar limits of conduct. The mildly neurotic personality has become the norm and almost the ideal of our society.

Almost the best part of this book is the chapter in which Taylor reports a long conversation with a young, Western-trained Indian doctor, who said to him:

"You in the West look down on the backward nations of the Orient. . . . You think you have nothing to learn from us because even our great specialty, religion, is obviously worm-eaten with superstition. As for politics, we were no closer to discovering democracy than we were to discovering the steam-engine, until you came to civilize us. Despite our traditions of nonviolence and respect for life we have probably had as many wars as you in the West have

had. Oh, we are poor benighted heathen, no doubt about it.

"But look closer. Since we did not have sufficient intelligence to devise ways of making peace permanent among all the peoples of the Orient, wasn't it clever of us to be so stupid that we never really invented effective ways of killing one another? Since our political structures never evolved beyond the gunpowder-stage of culture, wasn't it brilliant of us to halt our military technology at the gunpowder stage, too? You in the West—what is the level of your foreign relations? The crossbow stage? No, you have regressed below that." . . .

## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves

### AN INTERESTING COMPARISON

EACH year, for the past eight years, a hundred or more professionals—teachers, psychologists, educators—have gathered in Los Angeles to consider applications of the theories of Jean Piaget—the famous French child psychologist. And each year a substantial volume presents the papers read and discussed at the conference. Why does Piaget get all this attention? Because, essentially, his work through the years has shown that children—all human beings—learn by actively developing their own power to think, evolving mental structures enabling them to think appropriately at succeeding levels of growth. There is no "pouring in." You can feed and water the plant, but you can't tell it how to grow. The means of growth are entirely its own. Students and followers of Piaget are trying to observe and understand such means when the growing is done by children. In short, this voluminous attention to Piaget is wholly deserved.

For the general reader, however, a certain caution is needed in approaching Piaget. He found out so much that it became difficult to tell about it simply. The book we understood best is *Science of Education and the Psychology of the Child* (Grossman, later Viking), 1970, and in 1972 Piaget's *To Understand Is To Invent* (same publisher) appeared, having as title a one-sentence explanation of his basic ideas. From the eighth annual Los Angeles conference report, *Piagetian Theory and the Helping Professions* (University of Southern California Bookstore, University Park, Los Angeles, Calif. 90007, \$15.00), we learn that in 1977 Basic Books issued *The Essential Piaget*, edited by Howard Gruber and Jacques Voneche, which sounds like another good one.

These annual reports, published jointly by the Los Angeles Children's Hospital and the University of Southern California, have each some

forty papers, many of them offering useful material. The eighth report, currently available, is of the conference held in 1978, and among the papers offered a comparison between the public schools of the United States and those of mainland China captured our attention, even though it has nothing notable to say about Piaget. It is by Albert Yee, and a comment by C. E. Meyers serves as introduction:

Dr. Yee was one of the first Americans permitted to visit the People's Republic of China in the early 1970s when it was extremely difficult for any American to enter. His visit was enriched by having made an extensive pre-revolutionary visit, permitting him to interpret his observations in developmental terms.

Yee begins by pointing out that cultural background is commonly left out of such comparisons:

To illustrate my view, the presentation suggested a number of cross-cultural differences that would have to be confronted if the United States and the People's Republic of China were contrasted in studies of development, education and society. Here are several examples in brief:

1. In the U.S., the social emphasis is upon the individual and the egocentric rights, worth, and potential of individuals. In China, the group predominates and the individual identifies with social relationships which are group-centered and typically predetermined and fixed. Thus, the family and relationships with parents, siblings, and other relatives are markedly different in the two societies—one in which the individual develops as a central figure with a more exclusive ego identity and the other where the individual learns to suppress the self and develop loyalties and a sense of meaning in relation to others. School and work relationships can be understood only if the contrasting expectations, motivations, etc., of the child and worker are better known and how social-psychological balance between orientations to self and others emerge.

The strong family ties existing in Chinese culture, he says, affect the meeting of problems:

For example, divorce and marital problems in the P.R.C. are handled through neighborhood meetings rather than courts of law. The couple's neighbors discuss the situation and give their views

and recommendations to a people's hearing officer whose job is not to sort out legalistic complexities but to promote an open hearing and find consensus.

In other words, divorcing couples are not able to hire smart lawyers and fight out their differences in costly legal struggles. Is this good? Is it bad? Which method, the Chinese or the American, produces the most grief, and how do the children fare, in comparative terms? A lot of investigation—and thinking—is called for to answer such questions.

Dr. Yee goes on:

Since the traditional ethos of China has been said to be the scholar, education has been a powerful cultural institution with ramifications throughout the social system. Learning and knowledge have been greatly valued by the Chinese and teachers are honored and respected people. There is almost no equivalent in the U.S. without a doubt except mainly as a means to fulfill the individual's ego and potential. Learning for the sake of social responsibility and serving others are a part of Western education but are not themes that are as predominant as they have been in China. Whatever the ethos of the U.S. may be, no one, I imagine, especially teachers, would say it is based on the ideal nature of the scholar and what that represented. It is not surprising that educational changes and definitions of educational goals and what the educated person might be like have been central concerns of the New China in each new stage of its progress.

Another difference:

In the U.S., the parents, especially the mother are extremely influential in the child's early upbringing. The great bond between the child and the mother is fostered by a social system based on nuclear families and Western child development theories which reward strong ties between the nurturing, loving parent and the dependent, groping child. The Chinese give their children an early sense of responsibility and relationship to all around them, which they are expected to adopt without the great adjustments American parents normally assume upon the birth of a child. Raised in extended families and neighborhood groups, Chinese children relate to adults with proper deference and are "mothered" by different women, even non-relatives, who might share in the direct caring of youngsters for a group of families. Note the contrasting American custom of

hiring baby-sitters for a single household. While the American pattern tends to foster individuality, self-discovery, and autonomy, the Chinese children learn the patterns of conformity, common welfare, and equality within a community rationale. In the U.S., competition and personal efforts are said to be the main avenues to individual achievement of individual talents and standing; in China, group recognition and encouragement of individual talents and success help to identify leaders and those who might be of greater service if advanced. Although individual freedom in the U.S. has its clear meaning and value, the concept is difficult to interpret in China and has been interpreted as "selfishness."

Dr. Yee offers these observations, not to encourage "either-or" judgments, but to show the importance of recognizing cultural influences—our own as well as others. In his comment on the report, C. E. Meyers remarks that only a "mature society" seems able to free education of governmental influence, as is largely the case in Britain. "I would like," he says, "to think that such a system promotes creativity in literature and arts not possible under a controlled thought system," then notes that a revolutionary society may find it necessary to "indoctrinate the young to guarantee its philosophical survival." He describes other accounts of children in China:

These reports tell about the universal good manners and kindness of school children toward visitors, their group goals, their helping one another, especially the slower learners, their chanting of lessons in enthusiastic unison upon request, the absence of disruptive, hyperactive and noisy behavior, and quiet orderliness. These American observers attribute these fine qualities not to an apathy resulting from fear but to a genuinely internalized ethic. I think we have something to learn from them.

One more comment: This comparison is between *systems* of education. If there could be—a la John Holt—teaching without system, the basis of such comparisons might dissolve in time, through increasingly individual synthesis of the virtues of both approaches, while leaving out the limitations which externally managed programs of education inevitably develop.

## *FRONTIERS*

### A Friendly Visitor

IN the April *Harper's*, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Irish editor of the *London Observer*, pays Americans the kind of compliment one hopes is deserved, or that there is at least some truth in it.. He rejects the often repeated claim that the people of the United States have lost their "innocence." He thinks that not all of it is gone—by which he means the feeling that Americans are meant by natural law to do some *good* in the world. This idea pervaded the years of the founding of our republic, and while it suffered massive betrayal through our various imperialist expansions and interventions, justified by the "Manifest Destiny" theme, the British editor and writer finds some survival, today, of the original inspiration.

He illustrates by recalling, first, why, ten years ago, he left this country, where he had been teaching in New York. He and his wife had adopted a boy who is half African and half Irish.

By American terminology, though not by African, he is black. We feared for him, and for ourselves, if we went on living in New York. We were afraid not so much of the whites, whom we could handle, as of the blacks, whom we could not. We were afraid that black militants would teach Patrick that he ought to hate us, his white parents, and so destroy us all. There were many reasons why we decided to leave New York, but that was the deepest of them.

Today, a little more than ten years later, that fear has gone. I would not hesitate, now, to bring Patrick and his sister, Margaret, also black, to live in New York or in any other American city. The kind of war that then raged between black and white is over. Obviously the horrors and miseries derived from centuries of slavery are not over. The United States is not "holy Utopia." All the same, something momentous has happened: many blacks—I guess a majority of *employed* blacks—now feel and are felt to be a part of American society. This was not yet so ten years ago. Americans who have lived through those years may not be conscious of the extent of the change. I was conscious of it every few minutes, as I walked around the streets and markets of New York. The casual, friendly greetings and responses—"have

a nice day," "you're welcome," "it's my pleasure," "be my guest"—are now regularly on the lips of blacks as well as whites, which was not so before. Meaningless though some people think such tropes to be, I found them significant indeed. In these new conditions, "hate white" militants are scarcely more to be feared than Trotskyites in England, and those I can face with reasonable fortitude.

Mr. O'Brien explains what he means by American innocence, as distinct from the wholly insupportable notion that the people here are somehow free of "sin, guilt, or moral wrong."

It means [he says] that if Americans are forced to look at something ugly in themselves they are more likely than other people to do something about it. White Americans were forced from the late Fifties to look at the position of blacks in their society, and at what it implied about themselves. They did something—not everything, but something significant.

In the past decade, an apparently sad and sordid one for its government and people, the United States has grown together more than in any comparable period of its history. At a time when the philosophy of the melting pot has been repudiated, the melting pot in fact has worked as never before. And others, throughout the world, are better for it too. There are many of us who, looking to the United States, feel that we are looking at ourselves in the process of becoming: ourselves as we might be and do, given the opportunity for good or ill.

Well, whatever else might be added—or subtracted, and there is plenty both ways—let it stand.

Similar qualities in the British—to return the compliment—were responsible for the bloodless freeing of India. According to George Woodcock, the weakening of British imperialism was in part the direct result of Gandhi's clarifying presence. In *Who Killed the British Empire?* Woodcock observed: "One of Gandhi's achievements was to show Britons the reality of their own consciences, to reveal to them the gulf between their religious pretensions and political ideals and their actual practice as imperialists."

How to keep such ideals and feelings alive and make them stronger is a natural frontier

project. Here in America the cards of circumstance are stacked formidably against. If books are important in this task, the recent observations of a *New Yorker* editor seem a very bad sign. Recalling the fact that books are now printed on paper that rots in a fairly short time, the writer found the manner of their sale equally discouraging. He discovered that "in at least one large book store in the city small shopping baskets of the kind commonly found in supermarkets are made available to the customers."

Since that particular bookstore—consisting of two vast, fluorescent-lit display rooms with a checkout counter obstructing your way to the street—happens to resemble a supermarket anyway, the inescapable, though perhaps unintended, message is that books are consumable items, meant to be devoured and forgotten, like potatoes and frozen pizza. The implied inclusion of books among the world's perishable goods is hardly made more agreeable by the reflection that increasing numbers of books these days do seem to be written with just such consumption in mind . . . merchandised for a few weeks—sometimes only as long as they remain on the best-seller lists—and then are retired to discount stores (those jumbled graveyards of books, so saddening to the hearts of authors) shortly before dropping out of print altogether . . . It used to be part of the very idea of a book that it would have a chance to speak beyond the lifetime of its author and its first generation of readers. You might even say that books were meant to consume us, while living forever themselves.

If books are now going the way of all flesh, so also is the news—especially television "news." These programs—Neil Postman points out in the *Nation* for March 1—are produced as *shows*, and are called shows in the trade. They are not meant to do anything but hold the viewer's attention until the commercials get in their licks.

In some instances, people forget the "news" they have been shown or told while the show is still in progress.

This is not a case of stupidity. Everything on a TV news show is arranged so that it is unnecessary, undesirable and, in any event, very difficult to attend to the sense of what is depicted. After all, if it is commonplace for people to eat a chicken sandwich

while watching a mother collapse from grief over a dead child, in what sense can we say that news shows make people knowledgeable?

If we have any hope of keeping alive the sort of "innocence" Mr. O'Brien speaks of in his friendly comment about today's America, we shall have to devise some means of keeping our minds alive and our feelings open. The "media"—which now seem to include books—are meant to have an opposite effect. Make way for the merchandise is all they really say.