

## THE GREATEST CONSPIRACY

IN *The Search for Existential Identity* (Jossey-Bass, 1976) by James Bugental—a book with dialogue that sometimes seems as if it were written by a self-conscious and didactic Dostoevsky—a woman whose husband has been unfaithful comes to a psychotherapist for help. She can't stand what he has done. After listening to her outrage boil out for several sessions, the therapist finally exclaims:

"Blame, blame, blame! That's all that seems to matter to you, keeping score. Who's to blame. You don't seem to be very troubled about what's happening to your life, to your marriage, to your relation with me, and to your therapy. 'Let's just get the blame score right in that big scorebook in the sky.' What about something besides blame?"

Now, of course, the therapist must shoulder the blame. He obviously approves what her husband has done. He is unfair! Subversive of decency. But the time has come, and the therapist persists with questions like—Why is blame so important? Why must you decide who has done wrong?

Something happens.

"It's the only thing I have." Close to tears. "He took everything else."

The moral is clear, although the lady didn't quite see it, ever. Life is not fed by blame. She did decide, however, that other people weren't always wrong or responsible for her troubles. This made her righteousness a little less painful to live with. The competition in virtue with the rest of the world became less tense. Her feelings about responsibility and justice grew less dependent on locating and castigating villains.

To what extent is modern social criticism powered by the same, guilt-identifying drive?

The lady, one could say, was lucky. She suspected that something was wrong with her and

found a therapist able to track the source of her pain to herself, letting her see how this worked. She couldn't altogether stop what she'd been doing, but she learned some management of the tendency.

Can the world or a nation have therapists? The situation is far more difficult. How would you get the world to lie down on a couch and free-associate? We know what happens instead. The world serves hemlock to its most determined therapists. They may live blameless lives, but it is always possible to accuse them of corrupting the young. Those who only diagnose usually receive more tolerant treatment than the prescribers. Neither, however, can hope for popularity.

It is the business of the therapist—whether individual or social—to declare the priority of subjective reality in human life—a view not easily adopted. What then can the therapist do? Well, he can try to get people to consider what happens when the subjective facts—whatever they are—are ignored. Sometimes he is able to show that people who never think about the influence of subjective facts—or who pretend that they don't exist—are in some sense obsessed. In *Harper's* for November, Joseph Epstein, editor of the *American Scholar*, does something like this. He talks about the way people fix blame in the United States—the way they decide what or who threatens their well-being. He says:

How do most of us arrive at our opinions about the great American conspiracies? Judging from my own conduct, the least prominent among the ways is through laborious investigation of the evidence. . . . Something there is about too deep study of these conspiracies that either encourages fanaticism or shrivels the soul. They require prolonged study but do not seem to repay it.

Mr. Epstein is speaking here of such famous cases as Sacco and Vanzetti, Alger Hiss, the

Rosenbergs, and Oswald and the Kennedy assassination:

Each of these conspiracy cases is neatly calculated to fire already smouldering political fantasies: the Communists are everywhere in our midst is one of them; the other is that the most serious threat of totalitarian dictatorship has always come from within the United States government itself.

The books published in America on these famous cases they keep on coming out, year after year—ought not to be mentioned in the same breath with the distinguished works of European writers who occupied themselves with the meaning of older historical dramas: "Dostoevsky's understanding of Nekhayev in *The Possessed*; Turgenev's of the young generation of nihilists in *Fathers and Sons*; Conrad's of the anarchists in *Under Western Eyes*; Malraux's of revolutionary idealism in *Man's Fate*."

What is good about these old books? Well, they helped Mr. Epstein to ask the important questions.

There are other perspectives on the blame-establishing tendency. Mr. Epstein recalls an essay on "the adversary culture" by Lionel Trilling:

Most of the adherents of the adversary culture had come from the middle class, which it considered its enemy, and upon which it made over the years many a successful raid: challenging middle-class assumptions, excoriating its values, capturing its young. All of which was right enough, for it is through such conflicts that culture changes and a new synthesis is established. But as a class, with a character and power of its own, the adversary culture, again to quote Trilling, "has developed characteristic habitual responses to the stimuli of its environment." . . . The adversary culture holds certain ideas, and these dispose it, in the United States more than anywhere else, to an intense distrust of country that borders on hatred. . . . It also entails a release from moral responsibility. Founded on fraud, made to prosper through exploitation and expropriation, and now as always sustained by the villainy of coarse self-interest—here is a gloss on American history that most adherents of the adversary culture would accept

without qualification. Simplify, simplify, invoke the philosophers, and how much simpler one's judgments of public life become if one can reliably assume that in any conflict between the United States and another nation, or block of nations, or even individuals, the United States is inevitably and ineluctably at fault. How much more comforting to believe in conspiracies entered into by establishments than to believe in that greatest of all conspiracies—the conspiracy of human ineptitude and fallibility.

How does the understanding of a Dostoevsky, the insight of Turgenev, the penetration of Malraux, get mistranslated into tirades of blame? When does "challenging middle-class assumptions"—which Mr. Epstein says is "right enough"—turn into a vulgar caricature of what Herbert Marcuse called the Great Refusal of the artist's sensibility?

Marcuse's explanation is that, weak to begin with, artistic alienation has been smoothed and absorbed by the all-consuming marketing techniques of the technological society. Even the classics, now so abundantly available in paperbacks, are not really restored by all this circulation: "they come to life other than themselves; they are deprived of their antagonistic force, of the estrangement which was the very dimension of their truth." And Mr. Epstein, while hardly an ally of Herbert Marcuse, seems in oblique agreement with him. "Protest" is now conventionalized and acceptable when served up as entertainment:

Philistia long ago ran up the white flag. Today businessmen go to plays by Bertolt Brecht. Johnny Bench hangs abstract paintings upon the walls of his Cincinnati apartment. Lenny Bruce died something akin to a national hero. *The New York Review of Books*, with its distaste for all American politics, foreign and domestic, has long been the most favored sheet in the major American universities. *The New York Times Book Review*, sadly aping its betters, goes in for a tinny Sunday radicalism. *Time* and *Newsweek* traffic in an even more watered-down version of the same thing. Investigative journalism, the job of getting the goods on business and government, has come to be among the young the nation's most honored occupation. The adversary

culture now bids fair to become the mainstream culture.

What are all these people so righteously rejecting? Themselves, a psychotherapist might sagely say, but meanwhile they have—or think they have an objective target, scapegoat, or façade of guiltiness. Mr. Epstein finds Henry Luce's simplistic renewal of the Manifest Destiny theme, set down in *The American Century*, a handy summary of all that is now held to be wrong, wrong, wrong:

That America had a sacred mission in the world, that the small (and largely Protestant) town provided a splendid way of life, that American business was synonymous with civilization itself, that in its battle with Communism America's position was one of Christian rectitude—all these, and other notions associated with them, were subjected to a harsh scrutiny, chiefly in universities, and found not merely wanting but ridiculous, as indeed they were. Scylla thus avoided, the ship was steered flat on in the direction of Charybdis: America was wholly corrupt, the middle class was entirely repressive, American capitalism was unrelievedly destructive, and American foreign policy was little more than American business by other means, and filthy business it was. These now became—and remain—the received opinions of the adversary culture.

Well, one could take Mr. Epstein's abbreviated text of the gospel according to Luce and purify at least some of its meanings. For one thing, the Founding Fathers did believe quite seriously that America "had a sacred mission in the world." No less a spokesman than Tom Paine declared it. "Freedom," he announced, "hath been hunted round the globe," and he called upon his adopted countrymen: "O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind." Curiously, in a survey of America's recent mistakes in foreign affairs, another *Harper's* contributor to the November issue, T. D. Allman, finds reason to think that America's gift of freedom to the world, while very much blurred by less than admirable undertakings, is still regarded as real in at least some foreign parts:

In spite of all our bungling arrogance and all our misguided altruism, the extraordinary thing is not

that we so often make ourselves seem foolish and contemptible, it is that American freedom, American affluence, and American technology still can enthral so much of the world. In both Lisbon and Istanbul, this takes the form of two immense, costly, and useless suspension bridges spanning the Tagus and the Bosphorus. Neither carries much traffic. Neither marvel of engineering has transformed the local economy. Instead what one really sees arching above these two capitals of vanished empires, over these two waterways where no armada has ever arrived with a historical solution, are two symbols. No less than the illiterates lining up to mark ballots, the Tagus and Bosphorus bridges show how powerful even in these two least American of NATO allies—the one fundamentally Asian, the other essentially Latin-American—is the dream of modernity, progress, and freedom.

Concerning the small town, opinion now seems to be changing. We learn from the *Saturday Review* for last Nov. 26:

For the first time in 50 years, more Americans are moving to small towns than to cities. In the three decades prior to 1970, nine million people left small towns and moved to urban areas; but in three short years after 1970, 1.5 million left metropolitan areas and headed for homes in small towns . . . the most spectacular growth taking place in towns far from urban centers. . . . [Moreover] Six out of ten city dwellers want to move from the metropolitan areas; but nine out of ten small-town people wouldn't trade their life for any other.

While these may be feeble threads on which to hang hopes for a reconstituted republic, the point is that countless people, holding a wide variety of opinions live their lives in comparative indifference to both the distorting abstractions of Mr. Luce's appalling "vision" and the adversary culture's taunting condemnations. Paul Goodman gave intelligible form to the real problem in *The New Reformation*:

In 1967 I was invited to give a course on "professionalism" at the New School for Social Research in New York. . . . The class consisted of about twenty-five graduates from all departments. . . . My bias was the traditional one, that professionals are autonomous men, beholden to the nature of things and the judgment of their peers, and not subject to bosses or bureaucrats but bound by an explicit or

implicit oath to benefit their clients and the community. To teach this, I invited seasoned professionals whom I esteemed, a physician, engineer, journalist, architect, humanist scholar. These explained to the students the obstacles that increasingly stand in the way of honest practice and their own life experiences in circumventing them.

To my surprise, the class unanimously rejected my guests. Heatedly and rudely, they called them finks, mystifiers, or deluded. They showed that every profession was co-opted and corrupted by the System, that all significant decisions were made by the power structure and bureaucracy, that professional peer groups were only conspiracies to make more money. All this was importantly true and had, of course, been said by the visitors. Why had the students not heard?

As we explored further, we came to the deeper truth that the students did not believe that there *were* authentic professions at all. Professionalism was a concept of repressive societies and of "linear thinking" (a notion of McLuhan's). I asked them to envisage any social order they pleased—Mao's, Castro's, some anarchist utopia—and wouldn't there be engineers who knew about materials and stresses and strains? Wouldn't people get sick and need to be treated? Wouldn't there be problems of communication and decisions about the news? No. It was necessary only to be human, they insisted, and all else would follow.

Suddenly I realized that they did not believe there was a nature of things. Or they were not sure of that. There was no knowledge but only the sociology of knowledge. . . . To be required to know something was a trap by which the young were put down and co-opted. Then I knew that my guests and I could not get through to them. I had imagined that the worldwide student protest had to do with changing political and moral institutions, and I was sympathetic to this. But I now saw that we had to do with a religious crisis. Not only all institutions but all learning had been corrupted by the Whore of Babylon, and there was no longer any salvation to be got from Works.

No help from works, no faith except faith betrayed—what was left except to fix Blame, like the lady with the adulterous husband? Everything else has been Taken Away.

The lady—that exceedingly fortunate lady—found a man uncompromising enough to tell her what she needed first to hear and then to discover

for herself. Her husband wasn't entirely bad. She decided to find out about the good side of him, since she hadn't looked at it for so long. They both decided to collaborate with the good or livable part of the other; it was no great second honeymoon, but it didn't lead to murder and then suicide, which was what the lady said she had in mind when she started seeing the doctor.

Who might have lectured successfully to Paul Goodman's twenty-five graduate students at the New School? Nobody, Goodman thought, and he was probably right. People brought up to be comfortable only in the presence of rabid blame-fixing are not ready for any kind of therapy. Like Kenneth Keniston's uncommitted youth, there's no pleasing them unless you give them candidates for blame.

Yet if they *asked* to hear somebody different—or better, tried to find someone with something more important to say—we would tell them about Arthur Morgan, a man who had no more use for the bad things about America than they did, but who knew a great deal more about their causes than most anyone in the country. Morgan dealt with the evil he found where he found it, without making a big noise about corruption. He had positive ideals and worked for them all his life, holding his disillusionments down to manageable size. He probably understood the foundations of social ideals more clearly than most Americans, ignorant or learned, as his book on Utopia (*Nowhere Was Somewhere*) will suggest. He also understood why utopias seem to fail so consistently, as his chapter on this question shows. For example:

Another cause of the failure of utopias is the common belief that, once started properly on their way, they will be self-operating, self-purifying, and self-continuing. This mistaken view was expressed in a utopia of a century ago, *The Peopling of Utopia*, by Samuel Bower: "Every true votary of freedom believes that the popular principle once having gained a preponderance in the legislature, would be able to surround itself with all the conditions of durability; and that, whatever the form of government through which it might operate, justice would be constantly its

object, and the fullest measure of justice its final result. . . ."

The history of human institutions has provided frequent refutations of this theory, yet it has been the practical working philosophy of many a utopian effort. . . . When we examine some of the causes of the failure of utopias, we must reach the conclusion that many of these causes run deep in the cultural patterns of mankind. No legislative change, no revolution in the form of society, will take away the necessity for the long, slow growth which must prepare men for a new Golden Age.

This was Morgan's way of laying the blame. Mr. Epstein also speaks of "that greatest of all conspiracies—the conspiracy of human ineptitude and fallibility."

Alas, no best-sellers are composed around this theme. No parties wax powerful or crusades gain cadres from appeals for help in Morgan's campaign. Only, it seems, when people are cornered by history—when there is nothing left to do but acquire some good sense—do real changes take place. The interesting thing—the, at last, vastly encouraging thing—is that the good sense seems to be there, waiting, waiting, for a chance to be heard.

## REVIEW IT CAN'T BE DONE

A PASSAGE in Henri Bergson's *The Creative Mind* seems to go to the root of questions about abstract versus realistic art—questions raised from time to time by readers. Books dealing with this question all seem to present a common frustration. They take for granted certain things on which understanding of what they have to say depends. The reader, no matter how acute, tends to feel left out of the secret. Perhaps this is inevitable, and the books cannot be written save by taking those things for granted. But if we could know *something* about them, and why they must be left out, it would certainly help.

In the chapter, "Introduction to Metaphysics," Bergson says:

Take for example, the movement of an object in space. I perceive it differently according to the point of view from which I look at it, whether from that of mobility or of immobility. I express it differently, furthermore, as I relate it to the system of axes or reference points, that is to say, according to the symbols by which I translate it. And I call it *relative* for this double reason: in either case, I place myself outside the object itself. When I speak of an absolute movement, it means that I attribute to the mobile an inner being and, as it were, states of soul; it also means that I am in harmony with these states and enter into them by an effort of the imagination. Therefore, according to whether an object is mobile or immobile, whether it adopts one movement or another, I shall not have the same feeling about it. And what I feel will depend neither on the point of view I adopt toward the object, since I am in the object itself, nor on the symbols by which I translate it, since I have renounced all translations in order to possess the original. In short, the movement will not be grasped from without and, as it were, from where I am, but from within, inside it, in what it is in itself. I shall have hold of an absolute.

There seems a great deal unsaid, here, and the unsaid part makes what Bergson says clear. We know, that is, what he means, but could not possibly explain it except to one with a similar sense of what is unsaid.

Well, how does Bergson help in relation to art? Art, one could say, is the artist's translation of the object into a set of symbols. But the artist struggles to go past the symbols, to get at the thing in itself. He can't, of course. His symbols, the tools of his attempt, defeat him. Yet he must try. And there are many ranges of symbols. No doubt there are symbols for every level of perception in human beings. There must be symbols for parts and symbols of wholes. And different ways of using them, with different accent marks, so to say. If the artist is great, we seem to grasp or appreciate his work, even though we can't tell why. (This is one of the things left mostly unsaid.)

What are the symbols which have the most symbolic power—the most "wholeness" in them? Well, logically they are probably the simplest ones. But the simpler symbols have a tendency to go flat and empty. We are not very simple, and we want to be filled with meaning, not contracted to some empty symmetry or colorless point. This being the case, every communication with symbols is some kind of compromise combining impact with generality. Often we try to get at such matters by studying children. In *The Hidden Order of Art*, Anton Ehrenzweig says:

Piaget has given currency to the term "syncretistic" vision as the distinctive quality of children's vision and of child art. Syncretism also involves the concept of undifferentiation. Around the eighth year of life a drastic change sets in in children's art, at least in Western civilization. While the infant experiments boldly with form and color in representing all sorts of objects, the older child begins to analyze these shapes by matching them against the art of the adult which he finds in magazines, books and pictures. He usually finds his own work deficient. His work becomes duller in color, more anxious in draughtsmanship. Much of the earlier vigor is lost. Art education seems helpless to stop this rot. What has happened is that the child's vision has ceased to be total and syncretistic and has become analytic instead. The child's more primitive syncretistic vision does not, as the adult's does, differentiate abstract details. The child does not break down the shape of some concrete object into smaller abstract elements and then match the

elements of his drawing one by one. His vision is still global and takes in the entire whole which remains undifferentiated as to its component details. This gives the younger child artist the freedom to distort color and shapes in the most imaginative and, to us, unrealistic manner. But to him—owing to his global, unanalytic view—his work is realistic. A scribble can represent a great number of objects that would look very different to the analytic spectator. However "abstract" the infant's drawing may appear to the adult, to him himself it is a correct rendering of a concrete, individual object. His syncretistic vision allows him to disregard matching detail to detail.

The child's drawing gives his idea of the thing, which is all that matters. Realistic art, on the other hand, portrays things as most adults see them—or think they see them. Seeing and thinking are impossible to separate. "The eye," as a perceptive essayist once remarked, "is a part of the mind." Without the mind there would be no symbols. And without the mind we couldn't say to ourselves, as Bergson does, "I have renounced all translations in order to possess the original."

This amounts to proposing that a work of art is a limited expression of philosophic yearning. It is a use of symbols to get past or behind the symbols. Just as poetry is the magic which tries to overcome the finiteness of words. Work which has none of this inner conflict in it—which is content to treat symbols as though they were good enough as they are—is hack work.

Another passage by Ehrenzweig throws light on the question of what Realism is. He speaks of the "subtle, flowing distortions in Japanese art" of which, he says, the Japanese themselves are quite unaware.

When I was a young boy I was asked by my father to guide a Japanese lawyer round the sights of my native Vienna. . . The Japanese gentleman, though highly educated, was quite unfamiliar with Western art. We soon became good friends, and I concluded that all traditional European art seemed highly stylized and decorative to him. I also showed him around a conventional show of contemporary post-Impressionistic art and this too impressed him as stylized. I was puzzled. It dawned on me that only Japanese art could be realistic to him, in spite—or

rather because—of its conventional schema which somehow distorts every line. Apparently once the Japanese spectator has become attuned to the secret regularity ruling the linear flow of this persistent distortion, he can discount it. He so arrives at a global (syncretistic) view that appears to him quite true to nature.

Ehrenzweig gives a simple illustration of how abstract form becomes filled with meaning. We contribute the meaning; the drawing only gives us cues, more or less effective:

If we want to observe fine differences in abstract form we must project phantastic meaning into it. It is well known that we can judge the relative position of three dots in a circle with astonishing accuracy if we interpret them as two eyes and a mouth set in a rotund face. The slightest shifting in their position will affect their physiognomic expression. A smiling face becomes sad or threatening and vice versa. A copyist will do better if he copies this total facial expression instead of attending to detailed geometric relationships. This again goes to prove the superior scanning power of a total syncretistic vision and its better recognition of individual features, though it seems oblivious of abstract detail. In this lies the paradox of order in chaos. . . .

The paradox of syncretistic vision can be explained in this way. Syncretistic vision may appear empty of precise detail though it is in fact merely undifferentiated. Through its lack of differentiation it can accommodate a wide range of incompatible forms, for instance all the possible distortions of a face by a good caricature. Nevertheless, syncretistic vision is highly sensitive to the smallest of cues and proves more efficient in identifying individual objects. It impresses us as empty, vague and generalized only because the narrowly focused surface consciousness cannot grasp its wider more comprehensive structure. Its precise concrete content has become inaccessible and "unconscious."

For a conclusion to all this borrowed insight and wisdom, we return to Bergson, who has the happy faculty of making his meanings crystal clear. He speaks of the experience—really the goal, in understanding—of being *inside* the character created by the novelist instead of reading about him in all the story's detail:

The actions, gestures and words would then appear to flow naturally, as though from their source.

They would no longer be accidents making up the idea I had of the character, constantly enriching this idea without ever succeeding in completing it. The character would be given to me all at once in its entirety, and the thousand and one incidents which make it manifest, instead of adding to the idea and enriching it, would, on the contrary, seem to me to fall away from it without in any way exhausting or impoverishing its essence. . . . All the traits which describe it to me yet which can only enable me to know it by comparisons with persons or things I already know, are signs by which it is more or less symbolically expressed. Symbols and points of view place me outside it; they give me only what it has in common with others and what does not belong properly to it. But what is properly itself, what constitutes its essence, cannot be perceived from without, being internal by definition, nor be expressed by symbols, being incommensurable with everything else. Description, history and analysis in this case leave me in the relative. Only by coinciding with the person itself would I possess the absolute.

Art, then, is a civil war of symbols. The war cannot be won, but there are nonetheless some glorious defeats.

## COMMENTARY BEYOND "SYSTEMS" THINKING

WHAT John Todd says about the American preoccupation with "efficiency" (see page 7) was well illustrated by the film, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, which dramatized the extraordinary capacities of a company of British engineers, taken captive by the Japanese during World War II. The Japanese wanted a bridge across a river in territory they had successfully invaded and they ordered the P.O.W. engineers to build one. The British commander regarded this as a challenge and with his men set about constructing a masterpiece of improvised engineering—a bamboo bridge that would support heavy loads. In the process the British engineers lost track of the fact that the bridge would be used by their enemies for military purposes!

The irony of the situation—technicians betrayed by pride in their own high skills and commitment to assigned projects—was the source of great merriment to audiences of years ago.

John Todd's point is that today, by trying to make our agricultural and transport systems more "efficient," we are doing practically the same thing. We are helping people to *believe* in the suitability, necessity, and righteousness of the aims of these systems by using our best technical knowledge to make them work a little longer in the wrong direction!

Not that there is anything wrong with "efficiency." As Eliot Coleman points out, the right sort of agriculture will require more intelligent farmers who are "going to have to know their trade better." And as Paul Goodman said to the students at the New School, any sort of "new" society will require the services of responsible professionals.

The conclusion is obvious enough. The "how to" skills of the technological society must be liberated from the bad habits and misdirection they have acquired in the service of wasteful and exploitative objectives.

Goodman's students made the mistake so common among angry moralists—when the system is evil and threatens to break down, they reject not only the system but any kind of disciplined thinking about serving human needs. These moralists, instead of joining with builders like Arthur Morgan, become nihilists or "total" revolutionists who no longer believe there is "a nature of things."

## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves TREES AND PEOPLE

IN *Lindisfarne Letter* No. 5, which reports a symposium on Decentralization, Economic Structure, and Agriculture, John Todd, of the New Alchemy Institute, said:

The one thing everyone agrees on at New Alchemy is the fundamental importance of agricultural forestry in trying to create enough for all in the future. Because, if you stop to think about it, it's the tree that brings water to the surface. Everything you think about ultimately comes back to a tree. . . . It's fascinating psychologically; trees and people are linked.

One of the things we decided to do in both Canada and the United States and in Central America was to establish arboreta of food growing trees. Thus, in each of these areas we could be constantly evaluating new kinds of tree crops.

E. F. Schumacher, who took part in the symposium, said:

This is of the greatest interest in the big cities. It is the only way in the cities to bring back good air and food production. It is only through trees that you can bring it back, because there is always space in the cities. It is quite unnecessary to have any roads without trees. When I first saw treeless roads I was utterly astonished, because I went to school in Berlin. Don't discourage the New Yorkers. Make them—teach them—to see how much unused derelict land there is.

Paul Laird, an architect, added:

I wonder about the relationship of trees to the present trend of urban decay in New York. I speculate that it would be possible to stop the erosion of real estate in certain depressed areas of the Bronx and Brooklyn simply by selectively clearing those buildings which have been abandoned and forever replacing them with a green mat.

These are obviously great ideas. The importance of applying them in behalf of human survival, if not for more generous reasons, becomes evident from a reading of Erik Eckholm's *Losing Ground* (Norton, 1976, \$7.95), in which the maintenance of a forest cover on watersheds is very

nearly the heart of the matter for soil conservation. The point of this book is that without soil conservation, the world will certainly starve.

Eckholm tells a sad story of the failure of a great many reforestation programs. Why do they fail? The answer can be put in a few words:

In country after country, the same lesson has been learned: tree-planting programs are most successful when a majority of the local community is deeply involved in planning and implementation, and clearly perceives its self-interest in success. Central or state governments can provide stimulus, technical advice, and financial assistance, but unless community members clearly understand why lands to which they have traditionally had free access for grazing and wood gathering are being demarcated into a plantation, they are apt to view the project with suspicion or even hostility. With wider community participation on the other hand, the control of grazing patterns can be built into the program from the beginning, and a motivated community will protect its own project and provide labor at little or no cost. . . .

It is generally easy to recommend technological answers to ecological problems. Political and cultural factors are invariably the real bottlenecks holding up progress. Changing the relationship of people to land in the mountains, as anywhere else, invariably involves sensitive changes in the relationship of people to one another. Developmental funds and talents spent in the mountains are resources denied the cities and the plains. In the end, the greatest challenge of all may be convincing the people of the plains that the future of the mountains cannot be isolated from their own.

This way of formulating the problem focuses attention on how we bring up our children—on whether or not parents and teachers are able to interest the young in the conservation of watersheds and the planting of trees. Already, we have splendid programs of adult education in these areas, with considerable public response. We are thinking, not of what is happening in educational institutions, but of publications like the *New Alchemy Journal*, *Self-Reliance*, *Rain*, and *CoEvolution Quarterly*. These magazines are powerful influences in the shaping of informed public opinion. Just a year ago, in *CoEvolution Quarterly* for the Winter of 1976-77, a guest editor, Peter Warshall, filled ninety pages with

engaging educational material on the care of watersheds. One of the contributors, Roy Rappaport, tells of time spent with the Maring people, forest cultivators of New Guinea. The pertinence of this account is its recognition that what came naturally to the Marings, we must learn to teach ourselves deliberately:

It is clear to *all* men living in such systems that their survival is contingent on the maintenance, rather than the mere exploitation of the larger community of which they *know* themselves to be only parts. . . .

The ecological circularities that are apparent to the Maring horticulturalist are masked from men in state-organized societies by the sheer scale and complexity of these societies. Ecological considerations are less and less likely to temper purposefulness simply because ecological awareness is diminished. . . . This is to say that the forest is no longer conceived to be a *generalized, autonomous personified ecological system* in a larger *socio-economic system*. It is no longer mother and father to us all. . . . not an indispensable link in the circle of growth and death. . . . It is now a "resource." It has been degraded from the status of the world itself to mere object, an "it," something to be used.

Now the educational dimensions of what is called for begin to emerge. The young need to feel the mountains and the trees as part of themselves, part of their lives. It is the task of teachers to reinterpret and dramatize the material coming out in the magazines we have mentioned—say, the watershed issue of *CoEvolution Quarterly*. This shouldn't be difficult. Few magazines are as well-edited, making full use of natural drama.

Children old enough to drink a glass of water are old enough to begin to learn where their water comes from. Children old enough to go on "field trips" can be taken to visit water district offices, look at maps, see the streams coming down the mountain slopes, inspect the aqueducts, then have a look at the size of urban sewers, learn which dams in the region gave way under violent flood conditions. School children are quite equal to making simple tests of the quality of the local streams. Later would come the history of water supply, first locally and regionally, then more widely. How cities "work" was once

made into a course in college physics by Ed Marston, author of *The Dynamic Environment*. This book enlarges on the course, providing rich material.

Earlier, we said it is the task of teachers to interpret this material—teachers and parents, not "schools." Schools are places, external environments, not what happens there. Places are no doubt necessary, just as libraries are necessary. But doing what needs to be done is always undertaken by individuals, not by institutions. Institutions should be thought of as *tools*, instruments, practical means, never as sources of inspiration.

A good example of how to spread the idea of watershed preservation through tree planting is provided by a group of young people (in the Los Angeles area) who are replanting the nearby national forests with smog-resistant evergreens. They call themselves the Tree People, and they involve school children and others as volunteers in planting trees, not only in the mountain forests but also in city parks. The following is from a recent *Tree People* (newsletter):

Hundreds of children are involved, for the first time in their lives, in planting trees. This planting process sets off a series of small realizations which we hope will expand each person's awareness, fostering a concern for the earth and the conservation of its precious resources.

The thousands of trees being planted will add to the quality of our local environment, both visually and physically. The trees "consume" smog and produce fresh air, a process which is badly needed here in Southern California.

The Tree People now have headquarters in their Environmental Education and Participation Center, 12601 Mulholland Drive, Beverly Hills, Calif. 90210—formerly a city fire department depot, with ample grounds for planting demonstrations and other activities. The work of the Tree People is carried on under the name of the California Conservation Project, a non-profit corporation.

## FRONTIERS

### Requirements of Synthesis

A GREAT deal of (human) energy is frittered away in unproductive controversy. Controversy—differences of opinion—is inevitable, and the need, therefore, is to make it fruitful; to resolve, as Hegel said, thesis and antithesis into a new synthesis. An example of present controversy with a small degree of synthesis is provided by two articles in the New England monthly, *Yankee*, for last September. One is "Organic Farming Can Feed the World," an account by Steve Sherman of the thinking and accomplishments of Eliot Coleman, an organic farmer and organic farming educator. The article begins:

In 1969 this sandy-haired farmer with his wife Sue carved a homestead from a thick stand of spruce in Harborside Maine. The land had been described by University of Maine soil biologists as unfarmable. With composting, manures, and other natural methods—and plain hard work—Coleman reversed their description by nurturing a showcase one-acre farm that continues to attract fresh-produce buyers from 20 miles around the area and burgeoning attention around the country. Coleman became so engrossed and committed to improving farming in the United States that he established the Small Farm Research Association. He teaches three 12-day workshops on farming skills in the summer, lectures whenever and wherever he can (the Environmental Protective Agency invited him to Washington last April for his views), and in the fall conducts practical down-to-earth research tours to France, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and England.

Mr. Coleman is completely convinced that organic farming, including large-scale operations, will be able to feed the world. This article presents facts and figures. The time will come, he maintains, when present-day petroleum-developed agriculture will no longer work:

"Modern agriculture is like a junkie," he said. "If it doesn't get its fix, it falls apart. If the big conventional mid-western farm didn't get its fertilizer one year, it would be zero. And the doses have been going up."

Since 1950 the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has increased nearly five times. From 1966 to 1971 alone pesticides used on crops each year rose 40 per cent to 466 million pounds. Today inorganic nitrogen is commonly applied to corn fields at more than 100 pounds per acre. . . .

Coleman thinks the best thing that has happened to farming today is the rocketing price of petroleum. "Farmers operate on business principles," he said. "If they're making money doing it one way, they do it that way. If they found they could make more money doing it another way, they'd do it another way. The price of fertilizer is going to keep going up, and the price of gasoline is going to keep going up."

The other article in *Yankee*, "Organic Farming Cannot Feed the World," is by Hiram Perry, a dairy farmer with two hundred Holsteins, who argues hard-headededly that small farmers simply cannot compete with the big operators because of the greater efficiency of large equipment. He has his facts and figures, too. However, he concedes the excellence of the small organic farm:

Quite obviously organic gardeners and very small organic farmers feel the lessons they've learned, the success they have had on a small garden plot, can be applied directly to commercial farms with hundreds of acres under cultivation. No greater error can be made. A garden of a half acre or so can be fantastically profitable; a market garden of 20 to 40 acres is another matter entirely. Commercial farming ventures present problems in management, labor, sales and equipment that the small gardeners aren't even aware of, and will never be exposed to.

This article is mainly a business argument illustrating these problems, in which the cards are plainly stacked against the small farmer. Mr. Perry quotes a University of New Hampshire agronomist to sum up: "If we were forced to adopt organic farming methods, we would reduce our total crop production and send food prices up all over the world."

There is much force in this man's contentions, in terms of the economic and cultural status quo. While one can find organic farmers of considerable size who are "showing a profit," the decline in the number of small farms is a fact, and it is also a fact, as Coleman says, that "it requires

a more intelligent farmer to farm well rather than just buy his fertility and pest control out of bags. The boys are just going to have to know their trade better."

But Mr. Perry doesn't say a thing about what farmers will do when the cost of petroleum drives the price of food up to a level where people can no longer afford to buy it! Hard economic reality may then bring back small farms, using more human and animal labor, and fully as important, renew cultivation of what are now regarded as marginal lands. Today the economics and technology of bigness are still dictating the terms of agricultural operations, and present population distribution and the distributive schemes of the mass industrial society match and require these terms. Obviously, another kind of agriculture—the kind Eliot Coleman and Wendell Berry advocate and practice—will have to be matched by a more diffuse population, and a very different attitude toward "things" and their role in human life. The defenders of conventional large-scale agriculture never consider the far-reaching constraints that may be imposed on them by Nature, as well as on everyone else.

Fortunately, there are practitioners of organic farming methods who look to the future with all these possibilities in view. In No. 7 of the *Journal of the New Alchemists*, John Todd discusses the *structure* of our present socioeconomic system, showing that the design of this structure reveals the direction of human action under its rules.

If that action is in the wrong direction, increased efficiencies can only delay the penalties that must come in the end. We need now, Mr. Todd says, to redesign the structure, not pep up the existing one. He says in this article:

Unfortunately, at the same time that structure is beginning to be seen as pivotal, science and technology are addressing themselves almost exclusively to coefficients. For example, in the transport sector, automobile engines are being designed for greater efficiency. The goal is to double gas mileage over that of a few years ago. . . . At no point is the transport structure itself including the

highway system and the fuel base being seriously questioned. Because we have built a society to which this structure is essential and because, as we know it, it will collapse without the automobile, the larger question of transport remains taboo for scientists and designers.

This is the fundamental diagnosis which illuminates the controversy about farming methods and many other contrasting approaches to the problems of the time. It goes beyond facts and figures to the realities in thinking and values which determine all the facts and figures. To turn from the two articles in *Yankee* to Mr. Todd's philosophic analysis in the *Journal* is to gain perspective on both outlooks, and also to see ahead, with the writer, to the synthesis that needs slowly to be worked out, day by day.